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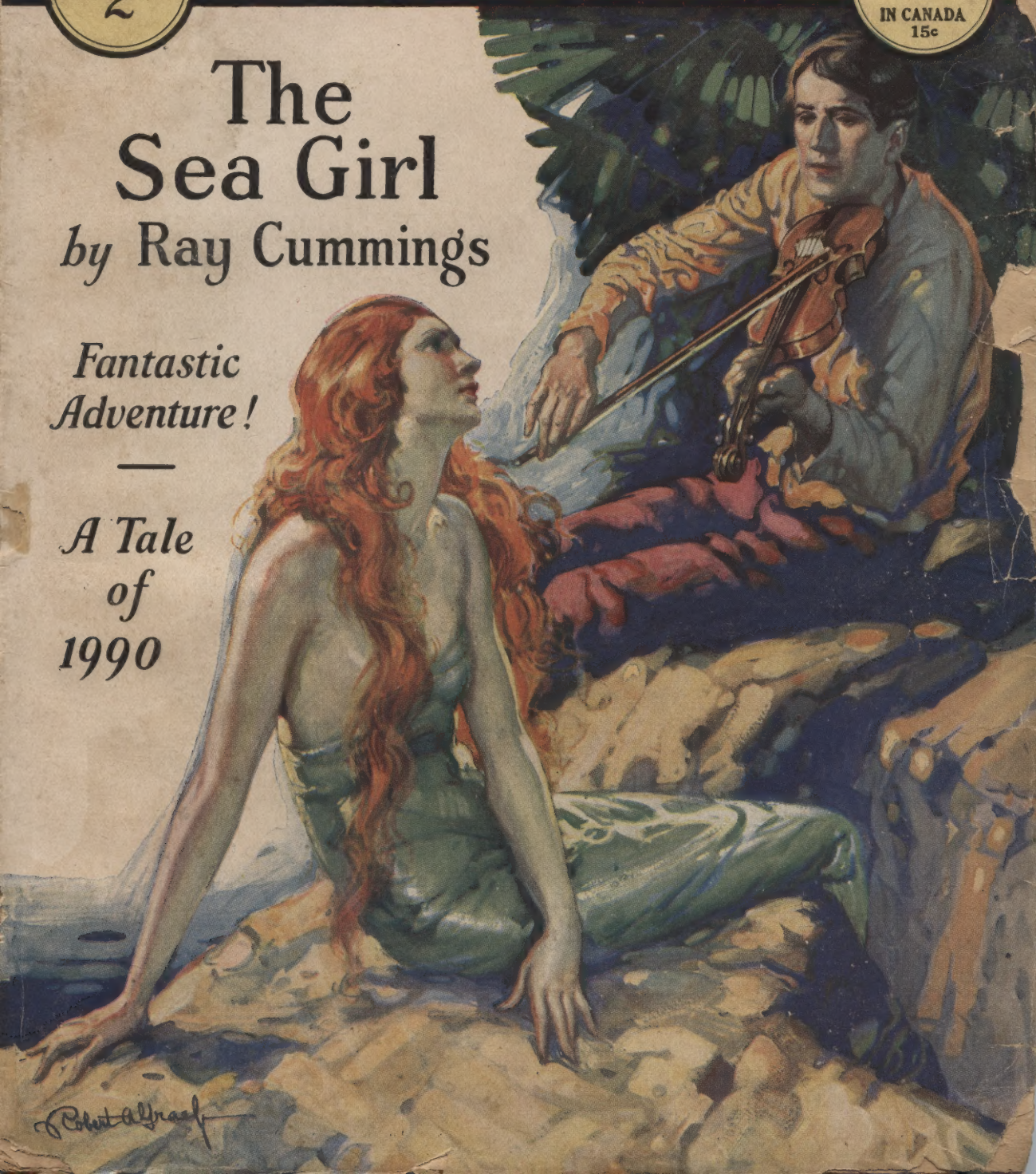
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The Sea Girl

by Ray Cummings

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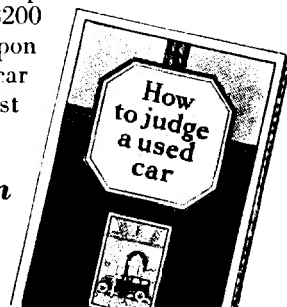
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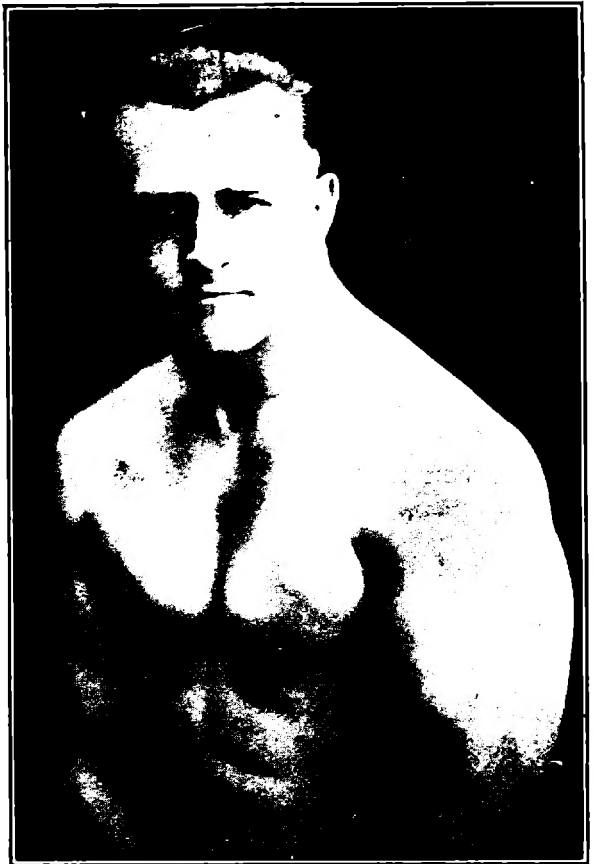
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ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 201

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ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 201

SATURDAY, MARCH 2, 1929

NUMBER 6



For an instant he saw the strange face in the mirror

The Sea Girl

Sunken ships and strange ocean changes presage the mightiest and most unaccountable threat ever made against mankind's world

By RAY CUMMINGS

Author of "A Brand New World," "Beyond the Stars," etc.

"... and he lived with her in a Golden Palace at the bottom of the sea . . ."

CHAPTER I.

HUMAN GIRL, OR SIREN?

THE first of the mysterious sea disasters occurred in March, 1990. It did not seem important; it was given very little publicity.

A small, old-fashioned freight vessel of some thirty thousand tons sank in mid-Pacific with the loss of all on board. The ship, which in its day must have been accounted a luxurious passenger liner, had, years ago, been converted to the freight trade, and its weirdly elaborate superstructure long since dismantled. Bound from San Francisco to the Island ports and

Dutch East India with a cargo of manufactured foodstuffs for the eastern island markets, it had sunk unexpectedly, and for no apparent cause, at fifteen N degrees and one hundred and sixty-five degrees E, northwest of the Marshall Group.

As it happened, I was among the first to receive the call of distress. My name is Geoffry Grant. I was twenty-two years old, that spring of 1990. They say that ours is the generation of youthful achievement; even so, I think I had done fairly well, for I was chief officer then, second in command of the largest vessel of the Sub-Pacific Freighters. Our line was newly established to supersede the ancient surface vessels whose passengers were nearly all traveling by air.

We were in fourteen degrees N and one hundred and sixty-five degrees twenty minutes E, on the return voyage, with Honolulu our next port of call, running in the thirty fathom lane, when the distress signal from so near at hand reached us. It was very nearly midnight. The surface was wholly calm; the night darkly overcast with a pallid moon. We had been up at 9 P. M. answering an emergency call from one of the great passenger liners flying west. We had hung at the surface for nearly an hour, waiting for them to come along, and another hour pumping up to them the needed fuel. My superior was disgruntled. It put us late for our connections at the Hawaiians; and with our schedule demanding fifty knots there was little chance of us making it up.

I was sitting off duty, in my cabin that midnight, listening to young Arturo Plantet drooling on his violin. He was our only passenger. A queer character, this boy; wholly different, physically and temperamentally, from myself, and yet between us there existed a real affection. I am a blond, husky six-footer. Arturo, who at this time was just turned eighteen, was shorter, and almost girlishly frail.

I once heard his father, in a moment of exasperation, call him a neurotic. He was not that; he seemed indeed always perfectly healthy, with steady normal nerves. But in this world of youthful practicality, Arturo was mis-cast. Apparently he cared not at all for achievement. He was a dreamer by temperament, rather than a doer. Of sharpened, poetic sensibilities, he seemed content to live in a world of fancy of his own creating, watching our busy, bustling realities pass him by. A pale, romantic-looking boy, his face beautiful rather than handsome; dark, lustrous, expressive eyes, with heavy girlish lashes; a mouth large, with sensitive girlish lips, and a shock of raven-black, wavy hair.

Yet there was nothing effeminate about Arturo Plantet. His firm chin saved him from that. His voice was soft, yet strongly masculine. I have seen his big eyes fill up with unbidden tears at a jibe from his father; but he was never petulant, and when angered or hurt, a very manly dignity sat upon him.

Nor was he lacking in a manly physical courage. He cared nothing for athletics. He could have been, I am sure, a champion swimmer—he seemed to take to the water naturally, and swam and dived like a little dolphin; but he would not train, nor enter any contests; he disdained them. But I remember that when he was fifteen, his older sister, Polly, was once endangered in the rapids of a Canadian stream. Against all reason Arturo leaped into it and saved her, with a resulting broken leg and arm.

Such was Arturo Plantet, who now sat in my cabin with his interminable violin. He was always very silent; often I wondered what fancies were drifting behind those brooding dark eyes. This ineffectual dreamer!

Yet our busy, practical world of science—so far removed from dreams—was destined soon to be plunged into a turmoil with Arturo playing a lead-

ing, if unknown and unappreciated part. Strange commentary! And I think that I am not wholly without a strain of romance myself, for it affects me strongly to look back upon it.

HE glanced up at me. "That's very pretty, Jeff, don't you think so?"

"What? Oh, yes, I suppose so. Aren't you going to bed, Arturo? That accursed liner—I don't know why they can't guard against things like that—puts us two hours late. We'll be fully that long making Pearl Harbor. The old man's furious."

"Is he? I say, this is a fugue of my own invention, Jeff. Listen how I weave in the two voices."

I rang up our chief engineer to see what he thought of the chances; it would be too bad, on this our third voyage, to be late. The London office would score us.

"Wait a minute, Arturo, shut that damn thing off—"

And then Randall came running down the passage outside. I caught his words: "The Malaysia's sinking! We're nearest to her—"

The old man rang my bell; I was ordered up to the control tower. Randall was telling some one in the passage: "That finishes our schedule, all right; we'll be all night on this job."

Arturo followed me. "What's the Malaysia?"

"Surface vessel," Randall called after us. "An old roamer. She's sinking, they don't know why. Piled to the funnels with cargo; she'll go down like a stone. They ought to keep those old traps in the rivers—"

"Where is she?"

He told us. Less than a degree and a half away, north by west, well off our course. Already we were swinging, and mounting to the surface.

Arturo stuck to my elbow. He was always unobtrusive. The old man allowed him the run of the ship, partly because he liked the boy, and also be-

cause of Dr. Plantet's influence and the considerable investment he had made when our line was financed.

Arturo was excited and awed. The sea held for him a curious fascination. It did for me also, but in a wholly different way. To me the sea was primarily a world of mechanisms; of mathematical charts, schedules to be maintained; a scientific business to be handled with skillful exactitude.

To Arturo it seemed still to be a world of fairy romance, or a mighty monster in its anger. To his eyes its surface still held scudding ships of ancient fashion; argosies sailing hopelessly over the storm-lashed waves toward unknown shining harbors. Or, again, his fancy saw a realm of monsters, hideous, fearsome things of the deeps, coming up to frighten the sturdy mariners of old; or oceanids disporting themselves on the beaches of desert islands; sirens with soft luring voices. Or sea horses, racing the Aegean waves with the car of Poseidon. A fairy world of dreams. To him our throbbing steel mechanisms were the unrealities, the anachronisms.

He was wildly excited now at the shipwreck call. But there was nothing to see; nothing to hear. The one hurried signal that Randall had picked up was the last.

We reached the scene and cruised the surface. A litter of wreckage floating in a wan moonlight on an oily sea. We dived as far as we dared. But even under our brilliant lights there was nothing significant to be seen. The Malaysia had gone on down. We were not far from the Marshall ridge here, but there were still several thousand fathoms down to this floor of the great Pacific basin. The Malaysia had gone, and we could not follow her.

THIS was the first of the many queer things that happened that spring and summer of 1990. I find them difficult to set down in any logical sequence, for at the time they seemed

to have no logic. There were several other unaccountable sea disasters to surface vessels. A whaler, with its attendant searching wasp planes loaded on its landing stage, was cruising south of the Aleutians, coming back to Skagway. It never reached there—never was heard from again. As though in the old days, before any of the aerial or under-water communications were perfected, it merely vanished.

Again, there was another old roamer like the Malaysia. It was at fifteen degrees N, south of the Hawaiians. It sent out one startled call: "Sinking—no reason." It was gone before help could reach it. And, like the Malaysia, none of its lifeboats were found, no life rafts; none of its safety devices put to any use; no single person found alive or dead upon the scene of its sinking.

There was at first little newspaper or radio comment. The public news organizations were engrossed with the "Yellow Peril" complications. The Yellow War, so recently passed, had its aftermath of bitterness, mingled with the cupidity which was rapidly forcing a renewal of commerce. The "mysterious sea disasters" passed with a cursory comment.

The air lines made more of them. In April, the great Trans-Pacific Aircraft Corporation began a broadcasted inquiry into the dangers of ocean travel. It was propaganda solely; and suddenly several of the world governments shut down upon it.

The subject, quite naturally, was of vital interest to our company. There were two vessels lost in March; two in April; and in May no less than six. All surface ships, slow, old-fashioned freighters, food-laden. And, what interested us most, all were lost in the Pacific, or its fringing seas.

By this time there would normally have been a very great world comment. I wondered why there was not, and did not dream until afterward that by

April the whole subject was under strict government censorship, with all publicity forbidden.

By May, the surface lines were gradually withholding their Pacific sailings. Our line was rushed, overloaded with business. There was, with us, considerable official perturbation. I knew it, though we were strictly forbidden aboard ship to mention it. Our directors were frightened, especially when Lloyds and the Amalgamated Marine Underwriters raised our insurance, though as yet no submersible anywhere had met with disaster, or even with any unusual occurrence.

And then, in June, one of our largest vessels, sister ship of the one on which I had my post, left Guam and, apparently, headed into the Nero Deep and stayed there! It brought consternation to us all. I was ashore at the time, visiting Dr. Plantet with Arturo and Polly in their home on the Maine coast. A radio came to me from our New York office; my ship would sail once more, and then be laid up until further notice.

With these events from March to June, there were intermingled throughout the world a hundred others which afterward I was to realize as significant. But they did not seem so at the time.

An unusual volcanic activity was reported almost simultaneously from several different quarters. Etna burst forth with a cloud of steam; harmless; unexplained—a puzzle to the scientists. Fuji, so long dormant, began rumbling, threw Japan into a panic, flung up a cloud of smoke and gas which whitened into steam. The craters of the Hawaiians were everywhere steaming. The geysers of Western America were abnormally powerful in their action; the New Zealand hot springs were suddenly, unnaturally active.

An earthquake occurred under the mid-Atlantic; a wave of tidal proportions inundated the coasts of Africa and the Americas.

Scores of such reports following one upon the heels of the other from widely scattered localities indicated a general, unexplainable disturbance of nature. A wind storm out of season; rainfall in another quarter, unduly severe. Rivers were too high, or abnormally low. And the tides were wrong; countless small news dispatches, even back at the beginning of 1990, mentioned the surprising abnormality of local tides.

NONE of it was significant of anything; like a puzzle wherein one fits together odd pieces, with the key piece missing. The tides, they said—I quote the words of one popular newscaster of scientific matters: "The tides are all wrong. The moon must have become a lunatic. The astronomers had better look into the matter."

The tides, if one cared to summarize all the various conflicting reports, were everywhere disturbed; too high a flow; too low an ebb. Everywhere they were growing steadily lower. Harbors and channels were losing depth. Reefs and bars and harbor shoals, which last year were covered at high water, this year were never covered. High tides everywhere were not quite high enough, while low tides, all over the world, were breaking all previous records.

By June there was much comment on this. Most of it, outside of shipping circles, was jocular. What of it? The age of air was upon us; who cared what the water was doing, except possibly the fishermen?

Had there been no censorship, authentic scientific analysis of conditions would very soon have stopped all levity. It did stop, on July 18, when Dr. Plantet prevailed upon the world governments to make the matter fully public.

That last voyage of mine in June was without incident, save one. It was witnessed only by myself and Arturo; one occurrence, most significant of all that had preceded it. Arturo

had made half a dozen voyages with me. He loved the sea. He would have none of air travel, nor surface sailing; but the sub-sea seemed to hold a lure for him. Hours at a time he would sit by my elbow at the tower window, gazing forward into the glow of our headlight.

I wondered why Dr. Plantet let him go on this last voyage, which, at best, seemed hazardous. I was not present in their Maine coast home when Arturo parted from his father and Polly; but when he and I left the Continental Air-Liner at San Francisco and boarded my ship, Arturo made one comment:

"Father wants me to stay in the tower with you all I can, Jeff. He is fearfully interested in this thing—how much so, well you'll know when we get back. He's worried; so very busy!"

I too had seen a change in Dr. Plantet these last months; a harassed look, a gray, haggard aspect of worry, or perhaps overwork. Though what he, a retired surgeon of forty-five, a student of oceanography as his chosen hobby, would be working at, I could no more than guess.

Arturo knew, perhaps, but beyond that one comment he said nothing of it to me. He was more silent than ever, this voyage. A grim, intent eagerness seemed possessing him. A dark flush was on his usually pale cheeks. A trembling eagerness it was. It showed itself in his smoldering dark eyes; a quiver in his voice, so that any one who did not know, might have thought that fear was upon him.

He sat with me throughout every watch, peering into the white headlight beam. Green depths of water surged at us; a fish occasionally surprised by our light, darted away. So little to see, and nothing out of the ordinary.

NOTHING—until that night in Micronesia, west of the Marshalls. We were, I think, about ten degrees N., one hundred and fifty-eight degrees E.—it had been some hours

since I had checked our exact position. Arturo and I were at the forward tower bull's-eye. Nothing to see save green speeding water. And then, abruptly, it flashed at us—a dim, illumined something in the ocean far ahead, flashing forward as we sped seemingly directly at it.

Arturo gripped me. "Jeff!"

The lookout's voice in the bow-hood sounded simultaneously from the speaker beside us.

"Danger ahead."

And a duplicate of the engine-room bells, and automatic warnings to the control operators sounded. In the mirror overhead I saw reflected the startled faces of the two men in the control tower; saw them throwing over the wheels.

We turned to port and slanted upward to the surface; so sudden a change that the ship listed perceptibly. An instant only. The whole thing was so swift at our fifty knot speed that in an instant the hovering thing had come—and passed. But we saw it, the vision of it distinctly registered upon our startled minds.

A dim, illumined something far ahead of us, glowing as the bow light picked it up. It grew, in seconds, to something round: a globe twenty feet in diameter perhaps. Metallic? I think so. It glowed darkly luminous and smooth in our light. A globular thing, with projections as though it might have been some monster sea-spider, risen from the deeps, resting up here near the surface with crooked, folded legs.

I recall my instant, fleeting impressions. A thing solid, metallic, mechanical. A lurking thing of a strange, sinister aspect—a thing diabolical. It flashed off sidewise and down as we turned, a darkly shining globe with a great round white spot on it like an eye!

Arturo showed unexpected presence of mind. He reached with one hand for the telescope range-finder; and

with the other for a stern searchlight, and trained them both upon the fleeing object now passing under our keel.

"Jeff, look!"

The telescope image showed for an instant in the mirror on a shelf before us as Arturo flung on the current. An enlarged image of a convex window, like glass, transparent with a dim green light behind it. A face was there at the window. Human? I do not know. But it showed in that momentary impression the face of a young girl. Lurid, ghastly with the green glow upon it. Beautiful? Perhaps that. Or weird, unearthly. I recall the intent staring eyes, the parted lips, as though with labored, frightened breathing. A startled face, framed in a tangle of tresses. But it was more than just startled. Those staring green eyes! I met them full, in the mirror.

And the light from them struck at me with a shudder and a lure.

An instant. Then the face, the image in our mirror, was gone. I reached up and snapped off the current. My fingers were trembling.

Arturo murmured, "Oh."

He was sitting very still, staring blankly as though the vision of that face was still before him.

CHAPTER II.

"COMING UP, FROM UNDER THE SEA!"

THE lookouts had seen the globe; even the old man, on his emergency mirrors in his cabin, had caught a brief glimpse of it. He stopped us at the surface. There was nothing up there; a calm, empty moonlit tropic sea, with nothing in sight except the lights of a distant passing liner ten thousand feet or so overhead.

We dived, and cruised around, from fifty fathoms to the surface. But there was nothing to be seen.

I think that none but Arturo and myself had caught the vision of that

girl's face. We did not mention it. Arturo pleaded earnestly:

"Don't, Jeff. Father would rather you did not, I'm sure. We'll tell him, let him inform the proper authorities."

I was determined, in the interests of my superiors, that our director-general should know as soon as I reached New York. But that was no reason for spreading it aboard ship.

It was the only abnormal incident of that last voyage. Naturally it left me wondering, as if here were the key-piece to all these scattered happenings.

A thousand vague conjectures, romantic, fearsome, surged within me. Ships drawn under. Ships, always food-laden. And queerly hovering in my mind was the persisting crazy impression of that girl's tangled tresses—like seaweed. I found myself waking up one night from a dream. A girl with glowing green eyes, and tangled flowing tresses like seaweed, was singing softly; and the song swept me with a trembling desire.

Arturo was more silent than ever for the rest of the voyage. I tried to discuss the thing with him. He shut me up sharply.

"Father will want to see us. You can talk about it then."

We were on time picking up the channel lights of our home port. Following close along the bottom, we cruised in between the two beacons of the twenty-fathom depth. The old man was beside me. He gestured toward our beacon chart.

"Those lights, Jeff, are at twenty fathoms, low tide. You and I know it as well as we know our names. But look at them!"

We were passing level with the caisson. Twenty fathoms! This was low tide now, and it did not need the special danger bulletins which had been flashed to us at every port all the way from Java, to warn us that something was wrong. Twenty fathoms? There were barely ten!

Arturo and I transhipped to the con-

tinental passenger liner; and again at New York we took the Reykjavik Local Mail, with first stop at Portland. Polly met us at the Portland landing stage.

"I've our plane here. Come on." She kissed Arturo and gave me her hand. "You're safe! We've been rather worried, until we got your landing message."

Arturo's sister was a year older than he—at this time, nineteen. As different from Arturo as a sister well could be. She was a practical little person; there was nothing of the ineffectual dreamer about Polly Plantet. They were distant relatives of mine, and I had known Polly since she was ten. We called her then, "Roly Poly"; a chunky little girl, with a round moon-face and long chestnut curls. I recall how she hated the nickname; but, instead of crying, she dashed at us boys, fighting us with flailing little fists.

At nineteen her "moon-face" had lengthened; but it was still solidly practical.

Her figure was not chunky now, but even the most lavish flatterer would never have called her willowy. A solidly wholesome, determined little thing this Polly Plantet. Quiet of demeanor, purposeful, yet withal tempered by a feminine softness. In stature she was something around five feet. Vigorously healthy, she seemed to me the very personification of healthy, normal young womanhood.

DR. PLANTET'S wife had died when Arturo still was in infancy.

They had lived then in Martinique, where the children were born. A mixed heritage: Dr. Plantet Anglo-Saxon—his wife Latin, with both French and Spanish mingled in her. Polly was so like her father that one could never mistake them, while Arturo was romantically Latin.

Motherless, Arturo had found in Polly almost a mother. Dr. Plantet was by nature intolerant of human fail-

ings, or so at least it always seemed to me. He did not understand his son, and to Polly went, if not his greatest love, certainly all the understanding comradeship of their daily life.

But Polly understood her brother. The essential, womanly softness of the girl's nature showed at its best with Arturo. Only a year older in age, she was vastly older in maturity. She was at once, to him, a sister and a mother; and a buffer between him and his father.

A little diplomat, Polly knew when to lead, rather than drive. No one could drive Dr. Plantet; nor Arturo either, for that matter—it was almost the only quality which he and his father had in common. Yet they loved each other deeply, of that I am sure.

Polly led us from the Portland landing stage, down the spider incline of moving pedestrian lanes to the lower stage where the private vehicles were stalled. Our luggage had preceded us in the chutes.

"We've been worried, Jeff. A hundred times father regretted letting Arturo go."

"Well, I went," said Arturo.

"Yes, boy dear—you went. It was foolhardy; Jeff's directors should never have taken the chance."

We climbed into the small plane which Polly had brought; the guards shot us off. It was 1 A.M. of the night of July 15-16. A warm, flawless night of brilliant stars, with the last quarter moon not yet risen. We darted up from the clanking Portland terminal like a humming wasp, and headed northeast along the coast.

I went back to Polly's last remark. "There seemed no danger, Polly; we saw nothing unusual. Except—"

I glanced at Arturo.

"I'll tell her," he said. He told her. Simply, unemotionally—with so queer a lack of emotion that it seemed a mask. She made no comment. She, too, seemed abnormally restrained.

And upon us all presently descended a silence; to me, an oppression—a sense of fear. Yet it was not exactly that either; rather the feeling of something strange crowding about us, something unknown.

These queer world events; this impending something—unnatural, uncanny—crowding us now, making us silent as though we feared to hear the voicing of our own thoughts. There were millions of people in the world these days who laughed and scoffed and thought it a jest that the tides were wrong, and vessels were disappearing; and who would have said, had we told them we had seen a girl's face within a globe floating in the ocean depths, that we were drunk, or dreaming that Homer had come to life again with modern trimmings.

But there were others, I am sure, millions of them, who felt uneasy, with panic hovering at hand. Like the presage of a fearsome, unseen storm below the horizon, there was something in the air all over the world. Crowding at us—something very strange, perhaps diabolical.

And it had marked Dr. Plantet. I could see that at once, this night, far more clearly than the previous month, by his harassed, almost haggard look; the surprising and, in him, unnatural, warmth and tenderness of greeting as he put an arm about Arturo's shoulders and welcomed him home; his solemn, almost grim manner as he listened to what we had seen, there under the water in Micronesia.

He turned to me:

"I've something to tell you, Jeff. Arturo and Polly understand a good deal of it, but not all. It is clear now, this thing we've got to face. I've persuaded the authorities to make it public.

"The world must know—must face it. We cannot be ostriches with our heads buried in the sand. Polly, have Frantzen carry down the luggage and run in the plane; and then bring us

out some lunch. We'll sit out here. It's too hot inside."

WE sat in a small stone bower on the shore front, with the stars over us, banks of flowers and ferns heaped around us; and, ahead, the open sea. The moon was just rising over the distant ocean horizon—a flattened, spoon-shaped crescent, hugely yellow. It flung a golden path toward us over the lazy, breathing sea. A strip of beach, golden in the moonlight, lay at our feet, with grim frowning rocks and headlands to the sides.

Nature as it used to be! There were no aërials in sight here, no landing stages; nothing of our modernity to remind one of a world mechanical with trees and grass and the moon almost forgotten. Yet even so, at our feet the disturbed world of 1990 obtruded. The strip of beach was naked of water; it sloped out and down to a rocky, slimy shelf, plunged steeply another twenty feet down to where the fallen ocean lapped at it. And in the moonlight the outer rocks and headlands stood queerly high, misshaped of aspect.

To me, with the oppression of spirit upon me, the sight was suddenly ugly—huge darkened teeth upstanding with gums receded to expose the spreading roots!

Dr. Plantet had been talking quietly. Now, indeed, I understood in a measure what he had been through these past weeks. A man, still vigorously young in his forties, though to-night one would have said he was fully fifty or more. He was a vigorous, stocky figure of a man; rather short, exceedingly muscular, with wide shoulders and a deep chest. A solid face, smooth-shaved, with deep-set gray eyes, and sparse brown hair graying at the temples. It was a kindly face. There was much to like in Dr. Plantet if one did not oppose him. But it was a stern face; harsh when stirred to anger.

At forty, wealthy by inheritance, he had given up his career of surgeon at

the height of his national fame.¹ He had always loved the sea; in his student twenties he had served as surgeon on one of the last of the old-fashioned passenger ships. Oceanography had always been his hobby; to explore the ocean depths was one of his dreams. Illogical in his intolerance of Arturo? I always thought so; indeed, I had once heard Polly tell him so, in Arturo's absence. But she could not make him see it.

He told us now what he had been doing these past weeks. Consulting with the scientists of the world governments; analyzing the conflicting world reports.

Ah, so much had happened, kept from all publicity! A huge secret meeting of scientists from all the world governments had been held last week in London. Dr. Plantet had been there. This thing that had been growing upon them all for weeks, now was obvious. The world would have to be told, and preparations made to meet the new conditions—to fight!

Dr. Plantet, essentially the fighter, must have played a leading part in this final discussion, forcing them to his views. It was growing upon me gradually as he talked. The strangeness of it, the strange, weird fear of it.

"Fight—what?" I ventured. I glanced at Arturo, a slim young figure in white, with flowing white sleeves. He sat, chin cupped in his hands, with knees hunched up; in his intent white face, his dark dreaming eyes were gazing off at the rising moon. He seemed not to be thinking of his father's words, but dreaming dreams of his own.

I repeated, "Fight—what, Dr. Plantet?"

From the house Polly came breathless, bearing the tray of refreshments.

"The newscaster from Melbourne has been on the air—I've been listening to him. Father, they keep on making a joke of it! They've seen a mermaid on a desert island beach in Micronesia!"

Arturo turned silently. Dr. Plantet said: "Did they give the position? What sort of mermaid? Who reported it?"

"Yes; they gave an island at nine degrees thirty minutes N, one hundred and fifty-seven degrees twenty-five minutes E. I looked it up. There's an unnamed island there, the tiniest of dots on the chart. Uninhabited—an atoll I imagine, of a few acres."

Dr. Plantet took some of the food; but I noticed that his hand was unsteady. Arturo gestured the tray away and sat brooding.

POLLY was saying: "A mermaid! A passing fishing roamer saw it at dawn a week ago. They didn't speak of it officially on the air, but yesterday, when they got back to Suva, the sailors told of it. A mermaid, sitting on the coral beach before the dawn, braiding her seaweed hair! They saw her, from miles away with the glasses. The ship had no electric image-finders. But they saw her sitting there. And some of the sailors swear that in the silence of the dawn they could hear her singing, but that's nonsense. I suppose the master had official instructions to avoid such a thing, so he kept on going and did not land. The sailors, some of them, were frightened. But others wanted to land and capture the mermaid. Can you imagine—superstitious ignorant men in this day and age!"

She was breathlessly excited. A mermaid, on a desert, south sea beach, sitting braiding her seaweed hair, singing to the sailors of a passing ship. The world was laughing at the tale.

Arturo said, very quietly: "You'd better tell us, father, what is going to be done. Jeff doesn't understand fully yet."

The tray of food stood neglected. Dr. Plantet lighted a cigarette and sat back apparently relaxed. He spoke quietly, at first precisely, as though carefully choosing his words to my

understanding; but there was in his voice a grim sense of power, and his burning eyes clung steadily to my face.

"Jeff, this is no new thing to me. This culmination is, I grant; I had never thought of actually living to see it. But the possibility. Jeff, for years I have been studying what, in popular language, they call 'our unknown earth.' What lies within our globe. Beneath the surface of our seas, that we know. But deeper still—beyond, beneath the ocean bottom—then what? Some six miles it is, Jeff, from the summit of Mount Everest to the ocean level. And another six miles to the abyss of the Nero Deep. Twelve miles or so. What is that? Our globe has eight thousand miles of interior. We humans have brought a scant twelve miles within our ken. Twelve miles out of eight thousand. Infinitesimal. It sounds incredible—but it is true. And yet some of us think we know something about our world. We do not—for most of it is as unknown to us as the moon.

"These vast oceans, this hydrosphere of ours, embraces nearly three-quarters of the earth's surface. You know its mean depth is not much over two miles. We think of these oceans as tremendous—this gigantic layer of water, so enormous of volume. It is not. On an orange it would represent an uneven skin thin as tissue paper. Compared to the wholly unknown interior volume of our earth, that's all it is—a film-layer of water, like tissue paper on an orange. Insects, crawling on the tissue wrapping—what do they know of the orange?"

He gestured again. "You see what I'm getting at, Jeff? Our oceans are receding. The volume of water in them, compared to the volume of the earth, is very small. It is receding—vanishing. But where could it go? The last geodetic survey, Jeff, was startling. It helped to show enormous errors in several physical facts about the earth which for a century have

been accepted as true. Yet, for twenty years now, astronomers and physicists have known that the calculated density of our earth does not check, within the limits of a tremendous probable error, with the earth's volume, or its mass, or its gravitational force.

"Something is wrong. All the figures, when one set of calculations is checked against another, seem wrong. We know it. And, as I pointed out to them in London last week—with present-day facts to prove it—the Granthin-Morley theories of 1960, scoffed at as they were, hit the truth. If our earth were a wholly solid globe, or nearly so as we have chosen to consider it, with a liquid core of molten rock perhaps—if it were that, with the volume as we know it to be, its total mass would be far greater than our figures show. But the mass we know to be a true figure. The calculated total volume is correct. The gravitational force cannot be questioned. What then is wrong? The density! One-tenth of our globe's volume, at the very least, must be empty space! A honeycomb perhaps."

Dr. Plantet sat up abruptly. "Jeff, there is in Holland a fellow named De Boer. He is, I think, the most eminent geologist we have to-day. He stood up last week and told them that our outer core, from the surface of the earth to a depth of a hundred miles, must be honeycombed. And Dr. Jaeger, of the Hawaiian Research Bureau of Vulcanology, supported him. Ah, now you are beginning to understand, Jeff!"

I WAS, indeed! This thing, so strange! Yet so logical, inevitable, that I could wonder how in all these æons of our earth's history it had never happened before.

I ventured, "The oceans are receding—"

"Yes. Not a question of tides—no tiny disturbed fluctuations. A general receding. There are nearly ten fathoms

gone now—half of it within the last week. Pearl Harbor is nearly empty, since you left it! A narrow channel, nothing more. Did you get a look at New York harbor? And here at our feet— The whole world is wondering, Jeff. But they are keeping it off the air, and out of the newsprints. The people think—most of those who have the intelligence to think at all—that it must be local. These crazy tides!"

He waved away that angle of it with a gesture. "Where is the water going? We do not know, but we can imagine. This tissue paper layer of water is receding doubtless into the vast honey-combed interior of our hundred-mile core. They'll say, 'Why, this is very strange. It never happened before, why should it happen now?'"

His voice was edged with sarcasm. "How do we know it never happened before? Our little human knowledge embraces a few thousand years out of the hundreds of millions of our globe's life history. Indeed, we do know that the ocean level has never stayed the same. Perhaps, over æons of time, the oceans rise and fall—empty and refill like a shallow cove with its tides. And this is only the same thing done suddenly. An earthquake, early this year perhaps, at the bottom of one of our ocean basins, opened a rift to let the water down. Dr. Jaeger thinks it may possibly have been that—the seismographic records show three such disturbances last winter. Whatever it is, the fact is here upon us. The public is going to be told, to-morrow or the next day. The oceans are emptying of water! It may stop any day. Or it may go on—completely to empty them! It may take years—centuries. Or it may continue quickly, more quickly than ever, until all the ocean beds are dry!"

He did not pause; he smiled his ironic smile. "The public will be thrilled! But not when they stop to think about it. The newscasters will picture the great new realm of land.

Three times as much land as we already know. Geography suddenly expanded. A rolling desert of lowlands from New York to London! Mountains and valleys down there. Land, sloping down from the heights of New York—over the new desert regions we have called the North Atlantic, up again to the heights which were the British Isles. It will be so thrilling! What wonders may be exposed. Ah, but they won't be so joyfully thrilled when the reality comes.

"I heard last week a score of meteorologists give an opinion—and not one of them could agree on what it will do to us! What change to our rainfall? Our springs? Our fresh-water supply? Dr. Jaeger stood on the rostrum; and we asked him what might happen. At this present moment the pit of Kilauea, Mauna Loa, Haleakala—all of them out there—are throwing up steam instead of lava and rock. The volcanic disturbance seems greatest in the Pacific—Etna is quiet to-day. We asked Jaeger if that would continue. Or grow worse. Would there be devastating earthquakes? He answered us very simply. The words of a truly great man, Jeff. He said: 'I do not know.'"

There was a brief silence. Arturo had not moved; he still sat moodily staring over the moonlit, fallen ocean. Polly sat breathless, with parted lips, her eyes upon her father. Her hand touched his knee.

"You do not mention the most serious thing of it all, father."

The questions had been trembling within me. The ships that disappeared; this thing we had seen in the ocean; this mermaid they said they had seen on a South Sea beach.

DR. PLANTET'S voice took a graver tone. "Ah, that!" He turned from Polly, to me. "Jeff, we humans, as we call ourselves, have been living for a few thousand years out of millions of centuries. We

occupy and know only a tiny fraction of our globe. Yet we have the temerity to assume that what we do not see, does not exist. Other beings are here—human of form, like ourselves. They do exist! Doubtless in the last few thousand years since we came—from them perhaps—to inhabit the surface, they have forgotten us. But now they have remembered—discovered us."

His voice took on a sudden vehemence. "This is theory, speculation—call it what you will. But they couldn't face me down in London—there is too much evidence. It's nothing new to me, Jeff; I've always been speculating on it. Do you suppose that all the legends of our primitive peoples are founded upon nothing? It is not reasonable. From whence sprang the idea of a world of gods? Supermen. Beautiful women. The oceanids? Seasnymphs—mermaids—beautiful sea-maidens because that was our human sex instinct to picture them that way. The gods—Titans—the personification of beautiful, virile manhood—that, the picture of them, was a human instinct, too, the outlet of primitive fancies, half fearful, half poetic.

"But from whence came the basis of it? All legends of every one of our ancient peoples—all of them picture unknown beings, here with us upon our earth. Too universal to be a coincidence! Some of us say: 'Why, those ignorant ancients saw the dugongs, with breasts like women, and called them women of the sea! Or saw seals, and thought them mermaids.' It may be so—but it hardly explains so universal a similarity of legends.

"For myself, I prefer to think that throughout the ages, this other race, this other civilization, has made occasional contact with ours. Perhaps their own legends tell of a great ethereal world of brightness with strange men like gods. Occasional, inevitable contact. You and Arturo saw what? A mermaid? If you had lived a few

thousand years ago you might have built a legend around her—and sung some immortal song in her praise. Ah, Jeff, we have not advanced very far! They saw a mermaid on a beach in Micronesia last week; and if we let them alone—though this is 1990, Jeff—the newscasters would presently blaze out with doggerel verse about her. Where is the difference?"

My head was whirling with it. Not his sarcastic gibes—but this thing, incredible, but proved by every detail of what had already happened. Facts not to be denied. Diversified happenings, so reasonless until the key piece was supplied! Ships drawn under. Ships, always food-laden.

Dr. Plantet was saying: "They're coming out, Jeff, these people of our vague legends. I conceive possibly—and Jaeger and De Boer agreed with me—that this sudden subterranean outlet of our oceans is not necessarily from a natural disturbance. Perhaps these other humans—they must at least be human, our ancestors perhaps, and I think probably more advanced than ourselves—perhaps they have found the water a barrier and have planned to drain it away.

"There is a clear connection in every fact we have observed, Jeff. They are under the Pacific Ocean undoubtedly. Coming up to steal our ships for the food they contain! They have done that. But what worse will they do? Come up when the water is drained, and attack us? I think so. I think even now they may be coming, with what strange devices to conquer the ocean depths—and to conquer us—we can only guess. Coming up to conquer for their own uses the bright ethereal realm of their legends! I believe that is what is going on down there now! And we must prepare for it. I've told our governments so, and they see that it is a fact. The world public will know it by day after to-morrow. The strangest danger that ever has threatened us. No use trying to avoid it.

No sense in trying to explain away facts which nothing else can explain. You can't say 'This is too strange, it cannot happen.' That's childish, because it *is* happening. The greatest menace in our history is upon us!"

CHAPTER III.

TWO THOUSAND FATHOMS!

I FIND it difficult to convey a picture of those following days. Upon so large a canvas as our great, diversified world surface, the few futile strokes I can give must leave most of all to the imagination. What fragments came within my limited knowledge I can tell as they recur to me. No one could grasp it as a whole, except those in authority, flanked with their busy scientific staffs, poring over endless reports, charts, summaries of world conditions and the myriad of diversified world happenings—abnormal, startling, fearful some of them; wide-flung events seemingly so unrelated, but each making up its tiny portion of the whole.

We got them there in Dr. Plantet's home at Sea End hourly from the newscasters. Ten fathoms of water gone from the oceans, harbors dry, rivers tumbling down new waterfalls where once had been the river's mouth. A hundred local items of emptied water fronts, fishing vessels stranded in the harbor mud, canals being closed everywhere to traffic.

A lurid, dramatic broadcasted advertisement by the Associated Bureau of World Air Commerce: "Schedules changed to meet new conditions. Air lines to the rescue! Stranded island and coast ports to be given air traffic. A thousand new local ships to be commissioned at once." An ad by the great Dayton builders, requiring additional men for the night shifts.

Hundreds of such things. Newscasters by the hour recited dry statistics of harbor depths, local climate

changes, routine weather reports, a learned, somewhat pessimistic summary of the world's fresh water supplies. A company organized to drill, wholesale, for artesian wells. A panic in the hot spring area of New Zealand. A spouting geyser reported bursting into existence in the Soudan desert. Etna and Vesuvius quiet—the Pacific volcanoes all spouting steam.

The newscaster's voice came day and night from our receiving grid. The tape clicked beside it, an endless stream of recorded events.

An exodus of people from the Gaspé fishing region; signs of a growing tendency to panic throughout all the South Seas; a Japanese mandate that none must travel from one island to another; an iceberg coming down far below the normal summer limit of drift in the North Pacific; ocean currents disturbed; a prognostication of what the new rainfall might be in various localities.

"Rot!" snorted Dr. Plantet. "They do not know—there is no one who knows anything about it!"

The British Isles were perturbed. There was much learned discussion concerning the Gulf Stream. Without it the cold of an almost Arctic winter would settle upon London. They had always been perturbed over the precious Gulf Stream, these Britishers. I recall reading that three-quarters of a century ago some of them had been bothered by the Yankee railroad from Florida to Key West. And when the additional road causeways were completed there was more British comment, claiming that the Gulf Stream was influenced adversely to effect the mild British winters. Nonsense, of course. But they had real cause now to be worried.

With my company giving me definite leave, I was free these days to remain with the Plantets. Dr. Plantet seemed to want me. He hinted that he would need me for some rôle in this world drama that I might play to advantage.

He no more than hinted at it; but I waited, eagerly to welcome it.

We spent most of our time at the air speakers. Polly was excited, tense with it all. Arturo said almost nothing. I was too engrossed at the time to remark him closely. But I recall that queer aspect of brooding; an absorption in his own queer thoughts; a moodiness. He seemed, often, to want solitude.

I would miss him from the instrument room, finding him perhaps sitting on the shore front, where, far out on a slimy, descending slope, the ocean lapped a full seventy feet from where it should have been. A graceful, slim figure of a boy with gentility stamped in every line of him; a romantic little figure, like Raleigh, the boy, Sir Walter, sitting at the ocean's edge, brooding, dreaming his own dreams with the lure of the sea upon him.

Looking back upon it the comparison strikes me. But at the time I recall I was annoyed with Arturo. He impressed me as rather sullen—a spoiled, sullen boy. Dr. Plantet had one evening said something with an edge to it—some trivial thing, unimportant; and Arturo had flushed with a deep, angry flush—and with quivering lip, had left the house. It was hours before he returned.

We had had numerous world reports that evening of vital interest—especially to any normal young man. But Arturo barely glanced at the printed tape lying in the basket; and wholly without interest sat in a shadowed corner of the room. It hurt Dr. Plantet—himself so actively plunged now into this coming crisis of the world's history—hurt him that he should sire a son like this.

MY picture seems confused. In that quality it approximates the reality, for these days of July, 1990, were indeed a confusion.

Dr. Plantet was away for a day several times. Always, while at home, for

hours at a time he was shut up alone in the instrument room, talking to New York or London; consulting. A stream of incoming official calls demanded him. I heard him once when he had left the audible speaker connected—heard him being questioned regarding the progress of his ship; and he had replied that already the successful casting had been made in the Norfolk shops.

I demanded of Polly what that meant.

“He'll tell you presently, Jeff. You—look here, Jeff, that reminds me.” She put her hands up to my shoulders, holding me to face her. Dear little Polly, so earnest! Her brown eyes were glowing with her earnestness. “Jeff, when father tells you, I want you to persuade him that I am in it, too. You will, won't you?”

“In what, Polly?”

“He'll tell you. He, and you of course, and Arturo—but also myself! There are to be four—I heard him say that. And I want to be the fourth.”

I answered her seriously, as I knew she desired. “I can't promise that, Polly, until I know what it is.”

It was nearly the end of July before Dr. Plantet told me of his plans. During all these July days of confusion there had been no further sign of any human enemy menacing our world. Surface traffic by sea had everywhere been discontinued nor were any submersibles in service. The oceans were abandoned, while a tremendous activity on the part of all aircraft organizations was manifest everywhere.

No sign of an enemy. There had been minor panics among the publics of the Eastern Islands; but the fear there was gradually waning. And in the Western world, comparatively remote from the scene of the threat, the idea of a human enemy whom no one had ever seen, was derided. It was best perhaps. There is nothing more dangerous than panic.

But officially there was no derision.

Official activities were more or less secret; rumors of them leaked out, of course, while bulletins distorted the facts to what officialdom considered was for the public good. But through Dr. Plantet's activities I was made aware of much that was going on. The “Yellow Peril” was lost and forgotten. All the world's governments were working together. The huge armored aircrafts were being recommissioned. Men were being drilled. The Yellow War, with all its main battles fought in the air, had given a tremendous stimulus to aviation, and all the devices which it had developed for dealing death were being made ready anew.

Underocean warfare was a thing of the distant past. But that, too, was being resuscitated. I heard that they were building armored submersibles. A Brazilian engineer, one Lopez, came suddenly into prominence with his claim for an underwater death-dealing ray.

They brought forth from the United States Navy Yard shops, new models of the ancient ocean bombs, called mines—things that could be electrically exploded. And tiny traveling bombships called torpedoes.

One of these latter was tested off Hatteras. In Dr. Plantet's instrument room we sat watching the test as it showed on one of his receiving mirrors. It was broadcasted over the world—I suppose fifty million or more people must have been watching it as we were. We had a good view; they had the finder on a small plane which circled back and forth. We saw the small submersible, awash at the surface, shoot out the torpedo. It came up like a child's toy, and then dived a few feet. It traveled swiftly; we could follow its progress by the tiny aerial projecting up from it, cleaving the surface like the periscope of an old-fashioned submarine. It sped straight for its target—a small vessel they had towed out and left drifting. There

was a dull, muffled report—we heard it plainly over the audiphone—and a heave of the water. The small ship presently sank.

It seemed rather a futile demonstration. But there were rumors of the Lopez ray—and diving bombs which aircraft could drop from a considerable height.

A multitude of official activities. Dr. Plantet was concerned with many of them—but mostly with this enterprise of his own at Norfolk. He was almost without sleep. Far into the night he would sit over charts, or blue prints—or casting up seemingly endless mathematical formulæ. And several times engineers came from Norfolk to see him, frequently taking him back with them.

ON July 29 he chose to tell me what he was doing.

"Come into the library, Jeff." It was after midnight, and he had just returned from a swift visit to Norfolk. "Come into the library, you and Polly. Where is Arturo?"

The soft, plaintive notes of Arturo's violin from his bedroom upstairs told us only too surely.

A shadow crossed Dr. Plantet's tired face; but his muttered contemptuous oath was vigorous enough. He said brusquely:

"Very well—let him alone, Jeff. He probably isn't interested."

Polly had joined us. "He is, father—I'll get him."

I heard her voice when she got up the incline:

"Arturo! Father is back—it's successful—they've tried the hull under pressure! Boy, dear—"

The door closed upon her; but she came down presently with Arturo. I had not seen him all day.

"Hola, Jeff!" He smiled at me. "Good evening, father." He kissed his father—I had not seen him do it for a year. "Polly says it is a success—I'm very glad, father, dear."

I did not miss Dr. Plantet's gesture as Arturo kissed him; nor mistake it. His powerful hands on Arturo's slim shoulders seemed involuntarily to tighten; a caress—and it seemed a gesture of possession, as though this son, drifting away in spirit, were suddenly restored to him. A stern, vigorous man, cruel sometimes in his sternness; but I could see at that instant the love that he bore for his son—could see it in his convulsive, clinging gesture, as if he feared that Arturo, who had come to him now, might soon be snatched away.

It may have been a premonition.

"Yes, lad, a success. Come into the library—I'll tell you all about it."

We went in. I sat listening to Dr. Plantet. But for a time my gaze and half my thoughts were upon Arturo. He seemed this night abruptly older. He sat with what I fancied were wandering thoughts, striving to listen to his father, striving to nod, to smile, once or twice to question. But his mind was on something else—something eagerly frightening.

I could not miss the tenseness of him, and the new, older aspect of affection with which he regarded his father and Polly. Something within his mind absorbed him—burning eagerness for something frightening.

Polly saw it. She eyed me once significantly; she moved over and sat beside Arturo, with her arm around him. And he leaned down and kissed her.

Strange adventure, which Dr. Plantet now proposed us! Awe-inspiring; to me, adventurous by nature and with the lure of the sea upon me, it nevertheless came as a shock. And a great thrill.

I listened, and presently forgot Arturo, and had no eyes for anything but Dr. Plantet's tired, intent face; I had no thought for anything but his words. He was brief, abrupt. The oceans were receding, but it might be months before they had fallen appre-

ciably toward their greater hidden depths. Meanwhile, our governments were preparing to fight some unknown, unseen human enemy. No one knew the nature of this menace. If we were to be assailed, where would it be? In the Pacific, doubtless, but the Pacific is a wide-flung area.

"I believe," said Dr. Plantet, "that if we could locate them, we would find this enemy preparing to attack us. We will be months getting ready. In the meantime, what? Are we to wait without trying to find out what our assailants are doing? The floor of the great Pacific basin—suppose somewhere down there—"

He paused. I stammered suddenly: "You've been building a ship—but the deeps? Why, it's unthinkable!"

"But it is not, Jeff! Oh, the great deeps are beyond us with the water that now lies over them; they are safe from our prying eyes. But I can penetrate two thousand fathoms!"

I think I had never seen him so vehement; a triumph upon him, an excitement almost boyish with this enterprise the product of his genius and intrepidity.

"I've been working on it a long time, Jeff—from the very first reports of the abnormal tides. Polly will tell you how I've worked. If we can locate this enemy, even determine beyond the shadow of a doubt that there is such an enemy, what a stimulus to our own preparations for defense—the possibility perhaps of our nation making an attack and carrying the warfare down to them!"

JUST to-day, he said, they had tested the hull of his tiny ship for that depth. Two thousand fathoms—twelve thousand feet! The craft was a tiny affair indeed! A crew of three or four. A little dolphin, flashing under the sea with a speed up to seventy knots.

"In barely two weeks we'll be ready, Jeff. Oh, they haven't stunted

me; the government has stood ready with its funds and all its resources. I've had materials from a dozen countries rushed here by the fastest wasps we could commandeer. I've had the pick of all the technical men developing this new principle. Hydraulics—internal, reciprocating pressure, call it what you will, we haven't named it yet—and I'm using the new Parodyne atomic engine.

"It's nearly ready—the cleanest running little thing—Parodyne himself believes we'll get seventy knots. The Australian Commonwealth Through Mail is planning to stop their flyer at Norfolk and carry us over the Pacific. Set us down where we like to begin our voyage. A diving range of two thousand fathoms, Jeff—we've tested it for that, with a fair margin of safety. And I can get another five hundred of littoral region with the Franklin searchlights."

Two thousand fathoms! The great unknown oceans, with this little dolphin of a ship flashing down into them to such a depth! And I was to be on board! It set a thrill upon me. So might Columbus have felt when from the queen's fair hand came the money that made his voyage possible. But it must have been a thrill both of eagerness and of fear.

Two thousand fathoms? Why, we could skim the sides of the Tonga and Marshall Ridges; follow the Marianne Trench to where it yawned into the Nero Deep. Two thousand fathoms? What gullies might we explore! What troughs and furrows could we traverse up the steep slopes to the island-bearing rises! Why, what a realm of the unknown to bring so suddenly to our ken!

Dr. Plantet was saying: "You'll go, Jeff, of course. Ah, now you see why I've kept you here—to be my navigator. I could not find one I would sooner trust, for all your youth. If our world is to be assailed, we'll locate the point of attack—"

And I was chosen for such a voyage as this! I suddenly saw Dr. Plantet to be a name immortal; and the man himself sat here planning his voyage into the great Pacific. And it seemed that something of Balboa and Magellan and Tasman must be here in the room with us now, hovering here—something of them, come here to inspire and to welcome this new maker of the history of the sea.

And I was chosen to be upon such a voyage as this! I think that the humble sailors of those ancient lurching ships were thrilled by the adventure of their enterprise, but thrilled even more by a fear as they fronted the unknown.

CHAPTER IV.

A MARVELOUS DEEP-SEA CRAFT.

THE DOLPHIN was ready. We went down to Norfolk with Dr. Plantet upon his last inspection. At least, Polly and I went; Arturo did not go. He was ill, he said, and indeed he looked it. Flushed of face, with cheeks these last days gone thinner; brooding eyes, with an uneasy, restless gaze that seemed always to avoid us.

Sardonic words came from Dr. Plantet that morning when we left. Arturo did not answer them; he moved away in the library, as if suddenly threatened with childish tears. And Dr. Plantet, wounded to the core of him, I know turned his back upon his son and stalked grimly out.

I recall that as we ascended the incline to the air-stage runway I glanced over to the house. At the library window Arturo's white face was staring after us.

Was he afraid? He had said he would go with us on the voyage, of course. Polly was going. We needed a cook; some one to care for our physical wants. Who could do that better than Polly? It was character-

istic of Dr. Plantet that he should thus be willing to expose her to danger. A stoicism, a subversion of all his instinctive inner feelings of fear—and a warm pride in her that she should want to aid us and her world.

How much more keenly, then, did he feel shame for Arturo! Was the boy a physical coward? Arturo had said he wanted to go, of course. He was to record in detail our findings; cartographer upon this adventure to chart the unknown deeps. He had a skill with mathematical drawings; I could imagine such a task thrilling him.

Polly tried to hide for him his lame enthusiasm. His fear? We never discussed it. And I think now it was very strange that we so little comprehended this boy we all loved.

We stood in the Norfolk shops, where the artificial testing canal came up like a dark thread; stood gazing at the Dolphin as she hung in the cradle over the rectangle of water waiting to receive her. A little dolphin of a ship indeed, hanging there with her *ralite* hull smooth as burnished copper. A dolphin with trimmed tail and sharply pointed nose. Eighty-two feet of burnished hull, sleek as the body of a seal.

We walked around her; Dr. Plantet showed her points with a creator's pride. Hardly a projection to mar this sleek exterior. The vertical and horizontal rudders might have been a tail; the lateral planes, flexible, sensitive as the wing-tips of a wasp-flyer, were folded in against the hull, so closely that the cracks of them were barely visible. A workman on board slid them out for us—fins opening out to barely a foot of width, trembling in the air like thin steel sheets.

There were tiny stern ports for the atomic exhausts; the man on board swung them to show us how in themselves they could guide the vessel. There were bull's-eye windows, like freckled patches on the hull; and un-

der the bow, like a mouth, a tiny port swung open to expose a torpedo tube, the craft's single weapon, with the staring eyes of the Franklin searchlights above it.

We climbed over the spider-bridge and went on board. A small bull's-eye turret came sliding up for surface cruising; a tiny door gave into it so that we might crouch through and descend the ladder.

The upper slope of the hull had ingeniously opened to form a small level deck upon which we might sit with the ship awash.

Even for the eighty-two-foot length and a bulge at the middle of some twenty-four-foot diameter, the interior of the Dolphin was surprisingly small. Dr. Plantet explained to me his principle of reciprocating pressures, as he called it.

But I could comprehend, this day, no more than its generalities—a mere glimpse of the fundamentals of what now is so famous; and it was many months before I grasped it in detail.

THERE was an inner hull, so that the interior space of the vessel was considerably reduced. Within these two *ralite* hulls, each of them reinforced with every modern device, was an intricate core of tiny passages and cells, with water circulating through them under pressure. A strange yet simple principle of hydraulics—so difficult mathematically to grasp that none before had ever imagined it.

It involved many of the intricate laws of modern hydrodynamics—yet in theory simple as all great things must be.

The outer hull, crowded by the immense pressures of the ocean's depths, would give inward a trifle, to yield its pressure to the water flowing in the core. And that internal water, so swift of motion, converted the pressure we call *latent* into what now physicists are calling kinetic. Strange

term—kinetic pressure. Strange absorption into harmless gurgling motion of this crushing ocean force which for so long had held the deeps impenetrable!

I stared at Dr. Plantet. "Kinetic pressure?" Yet we have accepted as simple enough the conversion of other energies to be lost in motion. Latent energy, kinetic energy—terms simple indeed.

Dr. Plantet started up the pumps. With my ear near the inner hull I could hear the water circulating. Bubbling, gurgling at first; and then, as its speed increased, humming with a sound almost electrical. And at the windows, which now I knew to be double bull's-eyes, I could see the water circulating. A thick flat sheet of it flashing past with a queer, oscillating, wavelike swing so swift the eye could scarce remark it.

"These pumps operate automatically, Jeff. A faster flow, as our depth increases." He moved the switch-lever over to another contact; the humming went up to a higher pitch. "Put your hand on the hull, Jeff."

The burnished cold surface was gradually warming. He shut off the pumps. He added: "Curiously enough, Jeff, it gives us heat against the cold of the depths." He smiled. "Rather too much heat, if we use the pumps for more than an hour. But I have a refrigeration coil to help cool it. I think we shall have no trouble, even when running deep for considerable periods of time."

We were not long on board the Dolphin this morning; there was so much that Dr. Plantet had to do. A center passage like a narrow spider-bridge hung midway of the vessel's interior.

Beneath it, in the center, the Parodyne engine lay in its terrace of burnished blocks, with coils and dials and intensifying tubes glowing dimly yellow in the gloom as Dr. Plantet started it at its lowest operating force.

Almost silent—a vague burring sound as the electrons were tossed fluorescent in its storage globe—a green fountain of burring light, running into the outlets, through the pressure valves of the water-jacket, to plunge at last into the sea beneath our stern. Tiny electronic streams—there were six of them—reconverted by the water's contact from negligible electric mass into ponderable gas of radiolite, striking the ocean and forcing the Dolphin forward as a rocket is thrust upward by the fire-stream from its tail.

WE stood watching the Parodyne for a moment as it worked up its energy from the morsels of pitchblende it was breaking down into freed electrons. An ounce of fuel to run us for a day. So silent, so free-running, one could hardly hear it. A little jewel of a modern engine, so recently developed that there were only three, even of this small size, in existence.

We inspected the several tiny rooms which hung in frames to the sides of the passage, with the ballast and water tanks and pressure chambers beneath them. A tiny galley for Polly. Three rooms with bunks; a narrow space, by courtesy called the diner, with folding table and chairs.

Forward, beyond the end of the passage, the full conical interior was built as an instrument room, with the torpedo tube running under it to nearly amidship, where the torpedoes were stored. The Franklin projectors were here in the bull's-eye windows, by which, gazing along the light, through the jacket of humming water, we could see into the ocean ahead. I noticed here a score of familiar instruments, and others strange to me. But Dr. Plantet did not stop now to explain them.

We went back to the stern. A similar room, rather larger, held charts and instruments of navigation. A ta-

ble at which Arturo would work over the log and the diagrams. And here I saw the apparatus for air purification—cylinders of oxy lithic powder, moisture coils, tubes for absorbing carbonic acid and all the waste products of our breathing.

We climbed back to the floor of the ship. By to-morrow our little vessel would be fully equipped, provisioned, and ready. The Australian Flyer, westward bound from London to Melbourne, leaving London at 5 P.M. to-morrow evening, would stop and pick us up. The magnetic cranes lowered the Dolphin into the dark rectangle of canal at our feet. She lay awash, quiescent, waiting. Polly, trembling with the thrill of it, christened her with proper ceremony, and the little group of engineers and workmen cheered.

We flew back home to "Sea End." The servants had been given a holiday, and the house was silent as we entered. I recall a sudden pounding of my heart—the flash of a thought that Arturo might really be ill!

"Arturo! Arturo!" Polly's voice held a quiver of anxiety. The lad should have been at the gateway to greet us, of course. "Arturo!" Her voice echoed as she ran upstairs. "Arturo—father, Jeff, come here!"

We rushed up. Arturo's room was disordered. Some of his clothes and his luggage cases were gone. His small personal sending radio was gone from its accustomed table. In its place was a sheet of paper: a penciled radio code which evidently he had invented. And a note—a few brief words in his familiar scrawled handwriting.

We bent over it; pathetic, scrawled little note:

FATHER DEAR: Please try to believe in me. Keep the code and at midnights listen. If I need or want any one, it shall be only you. I am all confused. I want to do what is best, and I don't know. Please try to believe in me.

ARTURO.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.



A beam of light suddenly shot full upon him and there was a sharp report

The Zero Hour

Gambling with Fate is risky—and Gordon White was betting his all against frost and the thousand dangers that beset an orange grove

By THOMAS BARCLAY THOMSON

FOUR o'clock heralded the approach of the danger period—the Zero hour—for the many thousands of orange trees which huddled in the darkness, cowering from the frost's relentless, blighting search. The period just before the break of day; then it was that the thermometer was prone to drop swiftly malignantly, toward that dreaded "twenty-six"—the temperature fatal to the hanging orange.

Four o'clock came, and Gordon White, tall, vigorous young rancher, slipped quietly out the front door of his little three-room home to consult the thermometer which was suspended from a tall shaft of wood in his front yard.

"How cold is it?" Shirley, his wife, called fearfully from the opened win-

dow of their bedroom. "Will you have to light up?"

"Not this time!" Gordon replied. "It's a little above thirty, so I guess we're safe for to-night."

With a prayer of thanksgiving in his heart, he stood gazing into the star-studded heavens. His stoves, "pots," were filled with fuel, ready to be lighted whenever it should become necessary to save his fruit. When this fuel was burned in the battle against the cold he had none with which to refill, nor any funds with which to purchase more.

Every cent that he and Shirley had been able to save through their ten years of married life had gone into the initial payment on the five-acre orange grove. Expenses had piled up faster than they had dreamed possible,

and money which he earned at day labor vanished almost before it was obtained. Part of his first crop had been picked, and the funds obtained therefrom had been fed into the insatiable maw of every-day expenses.

There still remained on the trees approximately one thousand boxes, enough to meet the coming payment on the ranch, the taxes, the upkeep bills of various sorts. Even possibly a slight sum left over for a few near-necessities, which seemed luxuries in their case. Small wonder that this early cold snap worried him.

A low, ever-increasing rumble had been steadily growing in his ears. Suddenly his mind took conscious notice of it. It sounded like the steady approach of a heavily laden, motor-driven truck. But he could see no lights.

Hitching his dressing robe more tightly about him, he walked toward the road, stopping just back of the low hedge which marked the edge of the private property. The dull roar had measurably increased. He strained his eyes and made out, in the gloom, the bulking form of an approaching vehicle. It was a truck, all right, but why the absence of lights? He started to step over the hedge for a closer investigation.

A beam of light suddenly shot from the truck's front seat, full upon him. There came a sharp report, a stabbing flame of fire, and Gordon felt his arm struck as if by a heavy club. With amazing promptitude, he "hit the dirt" just back of the little breastwork of hedge, exhibiting a trained celerity which would have gratified his sergeant back in those never-to-be-forgotten days in France.

The truck rolled on with undiminished speed. Gordon knew that he had been wounded, but dared not move for the moment. Another lightless truck was rolling by—the first had never stopped. A third passed; a fourth. Then silence.

He started to rise; was helped to his

feet by Shirley. She had rushed out to his assistance.

"Honey, oh, honey!" she cried, over and over. "Are you hurt?"

"Just a scratch in the arm! I'm all right, though!"

With her support he walked into the house. A hurried inspection disclosed a minor flesh wound.

SHIRLEY, recovering from her first fright, went about the bandaging of his arm with the quiet assurance of one skilled in the care of bullet wounds. Silently, swiftly, she worked.

"Good old kid!" Gordon said tenderly, proudly. "That's as neat a job as you ever turned out. There's nothing like having a war trained nurse in the family!"

"The brutes!" Shirley burst out vehemently. "What did they want to do that for? Why, they might have killed you!"

"They probably think they did," he replied. "Else they might have stopped and finished the job."

"What do you think they are—bootleggers?"

"They were going the wrong way for that," he answered. "They're probably fruit thieves."

"Fruit thieves!" she echoed. "Gordon—oh, Gordon, do you suppose they stole fruit from anybody around here?"

"I doubt it, but I'd better phone to Arcata. Should have done it at once."

Shirley made the call, and soon officers from the local constable's office were on the job. Nothing was discovered until morning; then it was found that the orchard of Steve Riker, a neighbor, had been raided. The loss was estimated at fully a thousand boxes.

Two investigators from the sheriff's office brought the news, questioned him concerning his experience of the previous night. Gordon whistled when he learned the extent of Riker's loss.

"That's fruit-stealing on a big

scale," he said. "A raid like that would about clean me out!"

"There's a regular epidemic of orange-stealing right now," one of the officers replied. "But I don't think you need worry. First they stripped about five hundred trees near Fullerton—that's forty miles from here, isn't it?" Gordon nodded affirmation. "Next they cleaned up at Downey, which is south of Los Angeles and completely out of the Fullerton district. That was a week ago last night. Three nights ago they gathered a man's crop near Pomona. And last night they visited your neighbor. The next orchard to suffer will probably be out in the Riverside district. You see, they keep jumping around."

"At least, my trees are well off the road," Gordon said with a sigh. "I doubt if they'd ever find them."

"We must move on," the officer answered, turning to his companion. "We might stumble into something accidentally. If you hear any loaded trucks around again," he said to Gordon, "call up the constable. They might be hauling your crop away."

"If they do," Gordon replied grimly. "I see where an amateur orange grower goes back to straight day labor in order to live!"

The officers departed, leaving the White household considerably disturbed over the affair. Riker's grove! Only a mile away, and on the same little-frequented road that ran by their own house. True, their five-acre ranch was fully two hundred yards off the main road and only accessible by means of an inconspicuous private way. Surely there was nothing to fear from the orchard-raiding fruit thieves.

"How is your arm, dear?" Shirley asked. "Does it hurt like everything?"

"Feels dandy!" Gordon lied, cheerfully. "But it looks like you'll have to put up with a man hanging around the house for a few days—guess I'll have to lay off work for awhile."

"Of course you will!" Shirley re-

plied. "I'll drive into town and get some things to dress the arm; then I'll go past the packing house and tell them not to expect you. Perhaps you can get some sleep while I'm gone. You're about dead for sleep. I'm so sick of you having to jump up every half hour to look at that old thermometer. Some day I'm going to take the thing down and hide it!"

"All right, honey," he replied, laughing. "But wait till I finish my automatic frost signal—then I won't care a bit. I think I'll do it to-day, too. It's almost done, and I'm not helpless—not by a good bit!"

"I'M going to make you sleep to-night," Shirley stated firmly, "frost signal or no frost signal."

"Then there'll probably come a freeze, and we'll lose our crop, ranch, and all the money we've sunk in it. Dear, how would you like to quit and go back home?"

They had not resided so long in Southern California, but that they still spoke of their former dwelling place as home.

"No, Gordon, never!" Shirley glanced wistfully at the green and gold glory of the surrounding orange trees, then her eyes lifted, resting upon the near-by, snow-capped mountains. Softly she added: "This, my dear, is home. We mustn't lose. It's our first chance, Gordon, for a real home!"

"Darned game little kid!" And Gordon's eyes shone gladly, lovingly, as, with his one good arm, he drew her close.

"Say, but aren't we the romantic things?" Shirley laughed. "Now let's get practical. Suppose some one did steal our crop! What would the soulful and poetic White family do then?"

"I'd get back into the electrical appliance business," Gordon replied grimly, "and give up our rosy dreams of being an aristocratic orange grower. Right now, I'm really more concerned with losing the crop through frost."

"Why don't you sell the crop?" she asked suddenly. "It's such a risk to hang on. Every orange is ripe enough and the price is good. I know, because Mr. Hart, of the Association, was here just yesterday, and I asked him. He said they would pay you five cents a pound for the entire crop. He really came to see if you would join the association."

"I just can't do it this year, honey," he said frankly. "I'd have to pay them a royalty on every box of fruit I shipped—and we need it all. The price is going up, and I've set my heart on at least six cents net. That will take care of all our necessary expenses and leave enough over to buy some of the things I want you to have. Nice furniture, you know, and—"

"I don't want nice furniture," Shirley cried petulantly. "Not if it means making you sit up, night after night, to watch an old thermometer, and then having to work daytime besides. Listen, Gordon!" Shirley came closer, took hold of a coat-lapel. "I want you to do me a big favor."

"What is it, hon?" he grinned down at her. "Want somebody killed, or shall I do the washing this morning?"

"Gordon White, be serious, before I give you a hard slap! If you won't join the Association, why don't you at least use their protective service?"

"I suppose Mr. Hart put that idea into your head, too?" he laughed.

"Yes, he did!" she replied, defiantly. "He said the patrolman comes to Brentner's, and right on past here, and that the cost is very slight. Then you wouldn't have to stay awake watching out for a drop in temperature. The patrolman would read your thermometer at regular hour intervals all night. Won't you do it?"

"Listen, Ma White! Reading that thermometer doesn't hurt me a bit! Besides," he finished earnestly, "my frost-signal's about complete now—and I just can't afford it—not this year. I'm hoping the crop will be picked and

sold soon; and anyway, this little cold spell probably won't amount to a thing. Just another false alarm. Next year, we'll be in better shape, but right now, we must make every cent count."

"Well, that's that!" Shirley smiled bravely. "I'd better be on my way if I'm going to get back in time to get you your dinner."

"I think I'll have to make that trip for you," Gordon said. "There are some things I must attend to. I want to be sure that I hold my job at the packing house; jobs may be scarce, and we've formed the eating-habit."

FIRST, he visited the packing house, drew the pitifully few dollars that were due him and extracted a promise from the foreman to save his job for him. Next he visited the bank. He cashed his check, ascertained that his bank-balance was below the five-dollar mark. Less than twelve dollars in the world, and unable to work!

Diffidently, he approached the railing behind which sat the president and manager of the institution. He stated his errand—the floating of a small loan—stressing his need for fuel for his smudge-pots, if the threatened freeze arrived.

The banker heard him through in frosty silence.

"No," he said, when Gordon had completed his case. "It's against the bank's policy to make such a loan. Your main reasons for asking for this loan are our best reasons for not granting it. You tell me you're wounded, not earning a cent; that you wish this money with which to further your gamble with the orange prices. What if a freeze slipped up on you some night? Where would you and the bank's money be then? No, my advice to you is to sell the crop to the Association right away for what you can get. They'll strip your crop off at once and you'll be sure of that much."

Gordon argued; stated his side of the case in a more prepossessing light;

spoke of his nearly-completed invention. He needed that loan—much worse than he cared to tell. The difference between the amount the Association would pay and the price he was so sure of getting if he could hold on, would mean so much to them.

"No!" Again the banker shook his head. "We cannot loan you money to gamble with. If some responsible friend will sign your note—"

Gordon didn't propose to tie up any friends in his business affairs. He turned toward home, sick at heart; but his fighting blood was up. He had made up his mind to see the thing through—he owed that much to game little Shirley. He would battle the frost until his present supply of fuel-oil was exhausted. Perhaps it would not freeze this year; some winters it didn't, he'd heard.

He drove home and allowed Shirley to redress his arm. It hurt rather badly by now, but Shirley said it was in good condition, and she should know.

That afternoon he fell to work, as best he might, on his frost-signal. Working with one hand was a handicap.

An hour, two hours, he tinkered, altered and adjusted it, perfecting the mechanical apparatus to his entire satisfaction. It was almost completed, when he was interrupted. A stranger, well-dressed and businesslike, stepped into his shop. Briefly, he introduced himself. He was a buyer for a big fruit company and wanted to close a deal for Gordon's entire crop.

"I'm in a position to offer you a top-notch price for it," he said. "A higher price than you will likely be offered again this year. My house has contracts to be filled and we need the fruit. We are offering this price for immediate delivery only."

"I've had several chances to sell," Gordon replied, "but I've sort of set my mind on what I ought to have and—"

"And I'm here to talk business!"

the buyer, Mr. Whipple, interrupted. "I can offer you six and an eighth cents for immediate delivery. Is that as high as you want, or higher?"

"It's higher!" Gordon admitted with a laugh. "And the crop's yours. How soon do you want it picked?"

"I'll shoot my trucks out here to-morrow evening about dark. I'll take every orange you have picked by that time."

"But what if they're not picked?"

"Then you can sell them to some one else. We don't want them later, at that price. Line up enough pickers to clean your trees before to-morrow night; I'll have boxes in your orchard by daylight to-morrow, ready for them to go to work. Shall we fix up the contract?"

"Sure!" Gordon replied emphatically. "I guess I can get hold of a big enough gang of pickers to do the job."

THE contract duly signed, the buyer relaxed a bit. He glanced curiously at Gordon's now completed invention.

"What's that?" he questioned.

"That's a piece of wasted time!" Gordon laughed. "It's an automatic frost-signal. I'll not need it with the crop gone."

"Don't forget that the crop belongs to you until it's delivered," Whipple warned. "We're not buying no frosted fruit! Your contract mentions that. How does that gadget work, anyhow?"

"Here's the idea," Gordon said, proudly, exhibiting his handiwork. "It's very simple. That coiled strip in there is bimetal—two different metals fused together. One metal reacts to heat and cold much more quickly than the other."

He pointed to a slender glass tube about three inches in length, which was strapped to the inside end of the coiled metal strip.

"An electrical connection is made in

that tube. See the two ends of the wire sticking up in there? In the lower end of the tube is some quicksilver. When the temperature drops, the metal strip uncoils a little bit—due to the swifter contraction of the top metal—and the glass tube is tilted toward the horizontal. At a certain temperature—any temperature at which I set it—the quicksilver flows forward and forms the connection between these two wires—and a battery circuit is closed. The horn blows until it's shut off or until the temperature rises again. And I'm here to tell you that horn will almost wake the dead! I intend to put it down in the edge of my orchard, two hundred yards away. That's where I'm interested in the temperature. Understand it?"

"Yes." Mr. Whipple was greatly interested. "That ought to work."

"It will work!" Gordon said, positively. "It all depends on the proper regulation of the pitch of that glass tube."

"How are you going to regulate that?" Whipple asked.

"I have a friend who works in the ice-factory. He promised to regulate it for me by submitting it to both hot and cold tests."

"Well, that's certainly interesting!" Whipple was preparing to leave. "Hope it doesn't get a chance to work before I get my oranges, however. Get not less than twenty pickers—about twenty-four would be a good margin of safety—and I'll see that the boxes are delivered in your orchard by morning."

Gordon performed a whooping, boyish gallop into the house as soon as the buyer was out of hearing, and broke the glad news to Shirley.

"Oh, Gordon!" she exclaimed ecstatically for about the twentieth time. "I can scarcely believe it's true! Mr. Man, how we are going to pay off the next installment on this ranch, and stop worrying about it, and about frost, and taxes, and water bills and a lot of other

things. Why, we can go to sleep nights, instead of worrying over what the weather man is going to bring before morning! And next year, you'll join the Association and have the patrol service, and then things will be so different!"

"You bet!" Gordon nodded assent. "And now I'm going out to rustle a gang of pickers. I wish you'd phone Wayne Hackett to come past for the frost-warning device. Tell him to get it out of the shop. It 'll not be much use to me this year—he probably won't have it tested and charted out for two or three days; by that time, the crop will be packed and on its way east. I guess I can stand it to watch the thermometer another night."

First, Gordon went to the office of the Association. He was sure the secretary would fix him up with enough laborers to care for his crop. Hart could always put his hand on five or six picking crews.

"Nothing doing!" Hart replied decidedly. "We're short one full crew right now, and only wish we had at least two more. There's a fearful shortage of labor, with the frost season at hand and this jump in fruit prices. Every one of our members who has marketable fruit is trying to shove it into the house. Too bad you don't belong; then we could take care of you."

"But I only need them for a day!" Gordon protested. "Just long enough to clean off about a thousand boxes. My trees are low—almost no ladder-work."

"I'm sorry!" Hart said, not unkindly. "My job wouldn't be worth ten cents if I took a crew off Association work at this time! My advice to you is to go down into the Mexican colony and see if you can find any idle men. Sometimes you can—they come and go so fast! It's doubtful, though, for they all know we want more men. Here, I'll give you a few names to look up!" He explored a card-index file and copied some names and addresses.

"Here!" he said. "These are leading men down there; they might be able to help you out, if you'll pay them, say, fifty cents per head for all they can dig up for you. Then if you'll turn the men over to us when you're finished with them, we'll refund you any employment fees you may have paid out. You might also try the Association office over in Claremore."

GORDON thanked him and left the office—but the life had gone out of him. He realized, only too well, the force of Hart's remarks. Other growers were as anxious to market their fruit as he. Pickers would, undoubtedly, be scarce and hard to find. He consulted the list Hart had handed him. Six names! Six men who might—just might—be able to locate idle men for him; and he needed twenty-four good fruit pickers; twenty, at the least.

Again he consulted the list. Juan Anchondo headed it. He might as well start at the top. He located the Mexican's barber shop and stated his errand. Juan glanced up disinterestedly from his perusal of the latest Mexican news daily, and shrugged his shoulders.

"*Hombres?* No!" he said flatly. "All go pick oranges. Maybe, next week." He indicated that labor conditions were out of his immediate control by another eloquent shrug of his white-clad shoulders.

Sadly, Gordon proceeded to the second name on the list. He stated his errand to the aged shoe cobbler, who glanced languidly up at his entrance.

"*No sabe!*" the man said.

"Work!" Gordon repeated. "*Trabajo! Trabajo por dinero! Sabe?* Work! For much money!"

"*No sabe!*" The Mexican shook his head. Gordon's constant repetition of the word "work" seemed to tire him greatly. He yawned widely and settled again to his interrupted siesta.

"Go to the devil!" Gordon exploded, and dived out the door.

At the third place, his luck was no better. The man here was more Americanized, more prone to talk. He told Gordon that every man he knew who wanted to work was already busy.

"Here!" he said, suddenly, as Gordon was on the point of leaving. "You go to Monrovia. My brother, he get you maybe six, eight men. He home six o'clock. No?"

Gordon grasped at the card. "Six, eight men" were that many. All he had to do now was to rustle sixteen, eighteen more. He continued the canvass of the home labor situation.

The next two addresses were barren of results, and he approached the last person on his list. The name Ybarra meant nothing to him, but his heart gave a leap as he located the place. It was a Mexican pool room, and, in large letters on a window was heralded the information that it harbored a regular employment agency.

"I'll find them here or not at all," Gordon admitted grimly to himself as he entered the door. For the seventh time that afternoon he made known his errand. The proprietor ceased to hum "*La Golondrina*" and regarded him keenly.

"I can get you two men," he said. "They got fired from Association yesterday. No good! Can get 'em, though."

He awaited Gordon's reaction to the information.

"If they won't work for the Association," Gordon responded hopelessly, "they won't work for me."

The employment agency proprietor shrugged his utter unconcern, and once more the plaintive notes of "*La Golondrina*" floated liquidly into the close, garlic-laden atmosphere of the closed room.

"Can't you find me any men—any *hombres?*" Gordon was in the last ditch; his back was to the wall—and all that. "I'll pay you—pay you for every man you get me."

"No, *señor!*" Ybarra replied bored-

ly. "See?" He roused himself, pointed dramatically toward the deserted pool tables. "No *hombres!* All gone! All pick oranges! *Sabe?*"

Gordon did; he understood thoroughly. He decided that every Mexican who was either physically or mentally able to carry an orange sack on his shoulder was actively engaged in so doing. He glanced at the results of his solicitations. Six, eight men in Monrovia, eight miles away, and two no-good men here. A fine chance he had of getting his crop off the trees tomorrow!

HIS thought of other neighboring towns, of their fruit-packing houses. Surely there must be men available somewhere in this wide valley. He set out on his mission, resolved not to give up until the last chance had been exhausted. From one house to another, he went; consulted labor agencies, bosses, men of importance in the orange-picking fraternity. Shortly before dark he turned the nose of his battered little truck toward Monrovia. One-armed driving was not easy, but he was becoming accustomed to it.

"I'll go get those six, eight men," he said tiredly to himself. "They'll be that much."

He found the brother and stated his errand. Yes, the brother could accommodate him to the extent of five men. He told him where they were to report the next morning, and the Mexican motioned him to wait. He turned away; consulted with a few lounging figures in their own language; turned back again to the waiting Gordon.

"They say 'too far,'" he reported. "Plenty work close home. They no like go so far away, *señor.*"

"Listen. Tell them I'll pay them extra—make it worth their while," Gordon pleaded.

Again the consultation among the group.

"All right," the brother finally an-

nounced. "They come. One dollar extra for each man."

Gordon started to object to the exorbitant demand, then realized his predicament and capitulated.

"Send them over," he agreed.

He gave minute details as to how to find his ranch, ended up by agreeing to meet them on the boulevard at the point nearest him at six thirty in the morning. Now, if he could only locate nineteen more. He went back and left an order for the two "no-good" men to report for duty—maybe he could get some work out of them. Then he departed on his last lorn hope—Claremore. The result was failure.

Gordon returned home, a dejected, beaten man. Right then he would have taken a very small sum for his equity in the little orange grove. With a shiver he felt the night closing in—cold already, and it was scarcely dark yet.

"I'll bet it frosts to-night, sure!" he prophesied dismally. "Anyhow, I'll get enough money out of the oranges to buy more smudge oil. I'm not going to lose this crop," he ended fiercely.

He found Shirley peering out into the night, waiting for him, and a lump rose in his throat.

"I'll fight this thing through!" he cried. "I've got to. I won't quit!"

He faced her with his usual cheerful smile. Her first concern was for his wounded arm.

"It's all right, honey," he assured her.

"I have a message, dear," she said slowly. "I hate to give it to you—it's bad news."

"Let the blow fall, Frau White!" Gordon grinned, avoiding her eyes.

"Well, a man came, said he was acting for his brother from somewhere or other, and that some pickers couldn't be here for some silly reason. I couldn't understand him very well, but I did get it that five pickers that you were expecting won't be here. Will that throw you very short, Gordon?"

Would it? Gordon laughed in sardonic humor. Would that leave him short-handed? Not at all! He would have left two men. Two no-good men, to pick one thousand boxes of oranges before to-morrow night. The joys of orange ranching!

"O H, Gordon, I almost forgot! Wayne Hackett took the frost signal away to test it. I told him you probably wouldn't get a chance to use it, but he was awfully interested in it, anyhow. Just a little while ago he phoned, wanted to talk to you—and then the telephone went blooey! Couldn't hear a thing, and then couldn't get him back. I hope it wasn't important."

"I should imagine," said Gordon grimly, "that the signal had suddenly decided not to—*trabajo*, as the Mexicans so quaintly phrase it."

"Oh, well!" exulted Shirley. "We don't care. Our worries are over, almost."

"Yes, almost!" Gordon echoed sardonically.

There was just one thing for it. He would have to watch his thermometer with an eagle eye this night. If it became necessary he would light up his pots, burn up what oil he possessed, and go down with colors flying. There was always the city and the old electrical appliance business.

At eight o'clock the temperature was down to thirty-six—cold for so early in the evening. While he was outside the patrolman stopped in.

"There's a special frost warning out, Mr. White," he reported. "Mr. Hart asked me to stop in and tell you. Can you light your stoves with that bum arm?"

"Sure, easily!" Gordon replied. "I've got a dandy arm left, and thanks a lot for the warning! I'll keep close tab on this little instrument to-night."

He failed to add that, after one frost, it wouldn't matter, that he would have no more fuel with which to fight.

He reëntered the house, and refrained from mentioning the patrolman's warning to Shirley.

"You go to bed, honey," he said. "I'm going to stay up and watch for awhile."

Shirley demurred, insisting that either she be allowed to stay up with him, or else, he come to bed and get what sleep he could, letting her watch the early part of the night.

"It'll not freeze until after midnight, anyhow," she argued.

"You never can tell," he replied. "I want to watch it closely for awhile, at least."

In reality, he feared to go to sleep, doubted if he could rouse himself again, once he closed his eyes. Finally, she left him and was soon fast asleep. Gordon took up his night's vigil.

At nine o'clock there came a slight drop in temperature. Down to thirty-four. Two degrees! At ten it was thirty-one. Three more degrees! Gordon gazed bitterly at the slender pencil of mercury. Even the weather was against him!

He was finding it harder, now, to stay awake. He had drank eight cups of steaming hot coffee within the past hour. The pain in his arm had grown quieter, the arm was becoming almost numb. Sleep clutched at him with seductive, soothing persistent fingers. If he might only close his eyes—just for a little while!

He roused himself, gasped, grabbed for his watch. What a relief! He had slept only fifteen minutes. He went to the sink, sloshed his face with cold water. Revived, he took up a book; then, almost asleep, he caught himself. This would never do. Three times during the hour, he consulted the thermometer. It reached thirty. At eleven thirty it was still thirty. What was that? He rubbed his eyes, looked again. His sleep-drugged eyes were apt to play tricks on him. Closely he looked at the glass tube.

He was right! Hurray! The tem-

perature was rising. The little metal indicator which usually rested on the top of the mercury column now showed a degree beyond it. The temperature had reached twenty-nine, and then climbed back to thirty. Gordon re-entered the house, jubilant. At midnight there was another rise of a degree. No danger now—if this kept up! He glanced into the bedroom. If Shirley was not asleep he would tell her. Her even breathing warned him to silence.

He went outside again, held up a moistened finger. Yes, he was sure of it; a slight breeze was springing up. There could be no frost with the air in motion. And the thermometer now bettered its former standing by half a degree. Still going up!

Happy beyond measure, he returned to the house, and, in that moment, a gust of wind struck him squarely in the face. That settled it! No freeze to-night!

HE contemplated going to bed—then discarded the idea. Winds had been known to die down. A frost might strike within the space of a half hour! He dared not risk it. Settling down comfortably, he again opened the discarded book. The page refused to remain steady. It blurred. He—felt so—comfortable. Peace and quiet brooded over the house.

Outside, with the stars sparkingly clear overhead, the breeze strangely disappeared, and again the deadly drop in temperature began.

Silently, furtively, like eerie shadows of the night, four huge, hulking shapes in the dim starlight, slipped quietly along on their nefarious errand. A full quarter mile from the White home they left the road, drifted along an almost unused private road to a point even with Gordon's farthest boundary.

A turn to the left, and they approached the little orchard. A large group of men materialized out of no-

where, and the huge shapes began swiftly, silently, to disintegrate, as willing hands lifted down stack after stack of empty fruit boxes, which were quickly filled.

Steadily they worked, and almost magically the stacks of filled boxes grew. Long before morning the end of the task was in sight.

"Are we almost through?" one man questioned.

"Just about!" was the reply. "You go down and send the trucks to the upper side. One trip, and we'll load up the lot. We'll be out of here in fifteen minutes more!"

Inside the house, Gordon slept heavily. The thermometer continued to drop, slowly, toward the dangerous "twenty-six." Twenty-nine, it reached; twenty-eight. Then it retreated, climbing almost back to twenty-nine. Again it touched twenty-eight. It was dropping faster now.

Four motors broke forth in low-toned droning. The picking had been completed, and the loading would occupy only a few minutes. Willing hands would toss the filled boxes to the wide, lengthy flat truck bodies almost as fast as they could drift through the orchard. Soon the entire crop would be safe in alien hands.

The trucks nosed around, started for the north side of the orchard—the side nearest the house. Everybody was tense, straining nerves ready to snap, almost; the moment of the final getaway was at hand—the critical moment, because it was of necessity the noisiest moment, and the most likely to cause a disastrous, plan-wrecking alarm. But Gordon slept on peacefully, blissfully. His chin was far down on his chest now, and his chest rose and fell, rose and fell in regular cadence. Sweet, restful, soothing sleep. And still the temperature sank toward the danger point.

"All right, fellows!" The whispered word went through the ranks of the scurrying, industrious men. "There's

nothing left on the trees now. Start loading!"

The trucks were at the north side. Four of them, at different points, ready to make a clean sweep of the stacked boxes. Soon they would be out on the road again, lumbering darkly through the night toward the market places with their cheaply acquired fruit.

The men swarmed eagerly toward the empty trucks.

IN the house, just two hundred yards away, Gordon dreamed, fathoms deep in drugging slumber. Again, in his dream, he went out into the front yard to read his thermometer, heard the approach of motor-driven vehicles. The first on-coming truck warned him from its pathway with a raucous, bellowing horn. He stepped off the road, out of the truck's way; it swerved toward him, seemingly bent on mashing him flat. Steadily, in reverberating cataclysm of horrible, nerve-shattering sound, the horn kept up its unearthly din, while the driver leaned out, menacing him, shrieking his name. Over and over, he called to him, screaming his name—and still the blast of the horn continued to beat upon his ears.

"Wake up, Gordon!" Shirley was bending over him, shaking him, forcing him awake. "Please wake up! What is it? Oh, it's awful!"

Thoroughly awake, at last, he sprang from his chair. It was an automobile horn. Some one outside must be in trouble. He dashed for the open air. Now he could place the sound, locate its direction. It was down toward the orchard—loud enough to frighten the dead or arouse an army.

Suddenly, he remembered the frost signal. Wayne must have finished testing it, and had placed it in the orchard! That explained the telephone message—Wayne had tried to tell him about it. He rushed to his thermometer. Slightly above twenty-seven,

just where he had told Wayne to adjust it. He raced back to the house.

"It's all right, dear!" he called. "That's the frost signal! I've got to hurry to the orchard. Nothing to worry about! I'll shut it off before some of the neighbors turn in a riot call!"

He seized his huge, long-snouted lighting-can, which almost resembled a locomotive oil can, and gave it a testing shake. Plenty of gasoline in it for priming. He filled his pocket with matches and hurried away.

First, he silenced the noisy horn; no trouble about locating its resting place upon a box, just at the edge of the orchard. The silence was oppressive, following the cessation of the terrible din. He approached the nearest stove, ready to set match to his lighting can.

He brushed past the first of his orange trees.

"What the—"

Gordon never completed the sentence. First with growing concern, then with wide-eyed amazement, he hastily searched his little orchard. Then he sat down, weak and shaken. He began to laugh hysterically, then he cried—cried regular man-sized tears, unashamed.

And there it was the employees of the fruit company found him, an hour later, when they drove in, their trucks piled high with empty boxes—boxes to contain the fruit he had promised to pick for them.

"You might as well turn around and go back!" he called to the man on the foremost truck. "I'll not need your boxes!"

"Why?" the driver asked. "You haven't backed out, have you?"

"Does this look like it?" Gordon pointed to the orderly stacks of boxes, filled to overflowing with luscious, golden oranges. "I promised to have the crop picked before to-night. Well, they're picked! Come and get them whenever you're ready!"

Blood Gold

By HOWARD R. MARSH



Never did a young mining engineer face such dark and hopeless horror as confronted Jerry Stevens deep in the desert Skeleton Mine!

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

DESERT DUST.

BRAKES set shrilly and the accommodation freight train bumped to a sudden stop. For a moment it wavered, hesitated, ready to plunge back down the steep grade of Bleached Bone Cañon; then it settled quiveringly, like a pointer at attention.

Out of the caboose dropped a brakeman, a wizened, sun-sucked little desert man whose grimy overalls and soot-smeared straw hat were both several sizes too large for him.

"Here's your dump!" he called back to some one inside the caboose. "Hi! Stevens! This is Cactus Siding. And some dump, too!"

Two suitcases appeared, followed by a long, thin, red-headed young man whose city clothes of businesslike gray showed plainly that he had slept in them, curled up in the caboose. Apparently that sleep had not been very restful, for his face looked weary under the

mask of yellow dust which had settled upon it and his blue eyes were blood-shot. Yet he grinned good-naturedly at the pessimistic brakie.

Jerry Stevens stared around him. Close at hand was the one-roomed red and black station, warped and decrepit. Above it, high on a gaunt trestle, loomed the inevitable water tank; it seemed to stand guard over a dozen loading pens for cattle and sheep and over one gondola car which was piled high with black ore. Fifty yards away sprawled the buildings of the little settlement: three frame residences of one story, half a dozen 'dobe huts in which lived the Mexican section hands, a general store, and a ramshackle, wind-sieving barn which bore a warped sign:

JOE JADIZ—LIVERY STABLE

Beyond the forlorn little buildings, huddled close together as if each were afraid to dare the desert distances alone, the great wasteland of the Mojave Desert billowed to the far horizon.



With a final desperate pawing at the air, the beaten Piute slumped to the floor

In the early morning light it seemed almost like a cool ocean. The creosote bushes, regularly-spaced, were the waves; the sun-bleached boulders were the white-caps; the giant Mojave yucas, raising their tortured arms to the sky, were the lighthouses.

But even Jerry Stevens knew that the Mojave was no cool sea; an infernal region of terrific heat, rather, of limitless distances, of jagged peaks; a cruel country in which men were pitifully impotent, unimportant. Yet he liked it immediately, liked the majestic sweep of it, its threat and cruelty and calm disdain.

"Yep, that's Cactus Siding for you, Stevens," the brakeman announced. "Jadiz, the half-breed, is the guy you will want to see. He'll drive you. Where'd you say you was goin'?"

"The Skeleton Mine in Duckfoot Cañon," Jerry Stevens explained.

"Way out north on the desert," the

Well, so long! The engine's had her drink and we're off!"

JOE JADIZ came tumbling down from his sleeping quarters in the loft of the livery stable. His black eyes were heavy with sleep; he was surly, uncommunicative, and eyed Jerry Stevens with obvious ill-favor.

Stevens, in return, studied the livery man and felt a flicker of amusement at the fellow's incongruities of form and dress. Jadiz was huge, barrel-shaped, past middle age, and yet he strove to preserve the air of a young dandy in that desert settlement of Cactus Siding.

"What you want?" demanded Jadiz, blinking his eyes and twirling his mustachio fiercely. "Why you wake me, eh?"

"They told me to come to you for horses," Jerry Stevens explained placatingly. "Sorry to spoil your sleep."

"Horses, eh? Where you going?"

"The Skeleton Mine in Duckfoot Cañon."

If the young tenderfoot had been less interested in the peculiar garb of Joe Jadiz he would have noted that the huge half-breed started violently. His sloe-black eyes narrowed and an exclamation rose in his throat; then he caught control of himself and bowed low, smiling slyly.

"Skeleton Mine, eh, *señor*?" He scrutinized Stevens from head to foot. "That is the mine of Señor Cardoni. A very rich gold mine, so they say." While he was speaking Jadiz continued his appraisal of Jerry Stevens. Now his mind was made up; he was ready to bargain. "It is a so long way there, *señor*. All day to get there, all night to get back. *Sí*, I will take you. But the price to me, *señor*, for the so-hard trip will be twenty-five dollars."

"That is satisfactory, Jadiz," Jerry Stevens said shortly. "When will we start? And what about food for the day? I had some black coffee in the caboose, but—"

"*Sí*. I take food. For two dollars, much food. And water, *señor*! We will need much water. It is a so long way across the desert. Only such horses as mine, *señor*, could do it; and only such a man as me"—he puffed up his big chest and pounded it with a grimy fist—"only such a desert *hombr*e could find the way."

"Can we start now?"

"*Sí, señor*. We will go in the buckboard. You could not ride a horse so far. Heh-heh! You would break in two pieces, eh? But in the buckboard with my so-strong Juanita and my dear Isabella to pull us, we will go."

The wonderful Juanita and the darling Isabella didn't look so remarkable to Jerry Stevens when they were brought from the corral and hitched to a dilapidated buckboard. Both were long-haired, short-legged desert mares, that homely, hardy result of the interbreeding of many varieties of wild horses; they looked as sleepy-eyed as

their owner and as slow moving, yet they were undoubtedly the best horses Cactus Siding afforded, and suitable for the rough work ahead. The buckboard, Jerry Stevens noted, had enormous wheels whose treads were six inches wide, sand treads; it was without paint, and its wood and leather alike had been cracked by heat and dryness.

The two suitcases were thrown into the back of the conveyance; Jerry Stevens climbed in front and Joe Jadiz made the springs sag complainingly as he took his place.

"*Ts-sck!*" he clucked and the mares moved ahead at right angles to the railroad track and its little border of houses, bearing north and northwest across the desert floor.

FOR many minutes there was no conversation. Jerry Stevens was adjusting his mind to this new, wild land and wondering what it would offer him of joy or sorrow, pain or riches. His eyes studied the great mountain ranges which reared against the eastern and western horizons. Huge bare peaks, copper-colored in the morning sun, loomed against the china-blue desert sky like gigantic Indians, old and stooped low under great burdens. They seemed to epitomize the brooding timelessness of the desert. Out there, far ahead, was the Skeleton Mine and an owner he had never seen, a man who signed himself, "Henry Cardoni."

Joe Jadiz picked his own trail across the waste, and rolled and smoked innumerable brown-paper cigarettes between orders to the mares. The desert ponies followed a zigzag course through the green-black greasewood and dry bush sage; the buckboard tilted perilously back and forth; occasionally it dropped with a series of jolts into the bleached bed of a barranca. bumped along the snakelike cut for a few hundred yards, then climbed laboriously up to the sandy floor of the desert again.

There seemed to be no rime or reason in Joe Jadiz's course; yet he steadily worked northward toward a jagged, toothlike butte. When he reached it he swung his two mares obliquely to the west. At this point he began to talk; apparently his early morning grouch had evaporated before the hot sun and many cigarettes.

"Three, four, eight men I take to Cardoni's place," he announced suddenly. "All in two months. It is that mine, eh? Many men go to that big, so big mine, eh?"

"Perhaps," Jerry Stevens agreed shortly. He was thoroughly uncomfortable in the jolting, swaying buckboard. His long body was cramped, his eyes ached from the sun's glare. The desert miles which had spread out so alluringly earlier that morning now seemed endless, torturing; the sun, at first so cheerful and warming, now beat down with torrid intensity. Already heat waves were dancing layer upon layer over the desert floor; the entire landscape quivered and shifted and even the mountains at the horizon appeared to leap and quiver, sometimes swelling balloonlike, again receding to great distances.

"How much farther is it?" Jerry Stevens asked the question as the buckboard rose from the fourth of a series of snakelike dry washes.

"Heh-heh!" chuckled Joe Jadiz. "How far, eh? We are but started. See! It is not noon. *Por Dios!* It will be four, five o'clock before we come to the Skeleton Mine and Señor Cardoni."

"The devil!" muttered Jerry Stevens. "Well, maybe I'll get used to this heat after a while. What about some water?"

Joe Jadiz passed over a felt-covered canteen. Its contents were surprisingly cool, and Jerry Stevens drank deeply. The water seemed to loosen his dust-choked throat and cheer him into conversation.

"These other men you've taken to

the mine?" he asked. "Laborers, I suppose. Are they there yet?"

Jadiz was silent a moment, shrugging his shoulders. From under lowered eyelids he stole a glance at his companion. Then, "How do I know?" he asked. "I did not bring them back, that I know. Maybe they are there yet, eh? Maybe they have gone out over the mountains the other way to the Mojave stage. *Sí*, maybe they have gone. *Carramba!* How do I know?"

"And this mine," primed Stevens, eager and hopeful once more; "is it as rich as Cardoni says?"

"VERY rich, maybe," Jadiz said.

"There are many so rich mines on the desert, but they are miles of hell away from everything, eh? Who will do the work? Who will dig the ore? Who will take it to the train, eh? It is not so easy. Only one devil of a man like Señor Cardoni could keep the mine at work and make it pay."

"How does Cardoni work his mine?"

Joe Jadiz chuckled. His broad shoulders shook and his big stomach heaved and rolled, but his mirth had a forced, false note in it. "Eh, eh, he is so droll, that Señor Cardoni! He works his mine with Piutes. *Sí*, he has Indians working for him—sometimes ten, sometimes forty. And forty are not so good as four white men. They do not enjoy work like you and I enjoy work, *señor*. They earn a little money, they go away. Summer comes, all go; winter comes, some come back. But Señor Cardoni works his mine all the time this year. Maybe with Piutes, eh? Every week comes a so big tractor across the desert dragging six, eight little wagons. Look! See the brush flattened like ten big elephants had walked across it? That is from the tractor train, eh? It is ore from Señor Cardoni's. It comes to Cactus Siding with Toby, a so-big Piute. He throws it into a gondola car and it goes to a mill, eh? It makes Señor Cardoni rich,

so very rich. Last two months come more ore than ever before. Heh-heh! Maybe these men I take to him have shown him how to do it."

"Probably," Jerry Stevens agreed. He felt suddenly expansive. Obviously the gold mine he had come so far to see was real; apparently it was also rich. "That's why I came, Jadiz," he added. "Mr. Cardoni advertised in an engineering journal for an experienced mining engineer. I wrote him and he wrote back, telling me of his mine, and offering to engage me. He said there was a fortune in it for both of us, and maybe there is. Anyway, I agreed to come out to look it over. He sent me a check for transportation and a nominal fee, and here I am!"

"Good, good!" cheered Jadiz. "That is what—" Suddenly he checked himself. "You will help Señor Cardoni mine his ore, eh?" he suggested, and chuckled again. "But come, *señor*! It is time to eat, and after the *comida*, one little *siesta*, eh? Even big, strong men like you and me, *señor*, cannot go too long on the desert without rest, eh?"

As he spoke the half-breed's black eyes searched for a vestige of protection from the burning sun. There was none. "We will sit under the buckboard to eat, *señor*," he decided. "And sleep under the buckboard, too. After that the afternoon will be very long before we come to Señor Cardoni and his so-rich gold mine."

As Joe Jadiz had predicted, the afternoon after the long *siesta* which was irritating and without rest to Jerry Stevens, seemed interminable. Slow, jolting progress, infinitesimal when checked against the brooding mountains, continued for mile after mile. Jadiz seemed still asleep, yet he guided the two mares with unerring judgment through sun-bleached boulders, clumps of greasewood and occasional little forests of yucca; from time to time he rolled a fresh cigarette between his brown fingers. Always he

bore north of west. Several times his trail crossed great flattened paths through the brush, ripped and devastated areas as if some monstrous, fire-breathing dragon had passed that way.

"The caterpillar tractor train from Señor Cardoni's," grunted Joe Jadiz sleepily. "It makes one great snake trail, eh?"

JERRY STEVENS was too weary to answer. He kept his eyes tightly closed, yet the calcium glare of the desert penetrated the lids and was increasingly painful; his throat and nose smarted from the constant irritation of alkali dust which rose around the buckboard and hung in the still air; he drank great gulps of water, but constantly felt dry and thirsty, withered.

The sun was dropping rapidly to the western peaks before Joe Jadiz offered an encouragement. He raised his slouching body and grunted.

"Duckfoot Cañon," he announced, waving a huge hand at a fan-shaped series of clefts in the mountain wall a mile ahead of the plodding mares. "See the duck's foot, eh? And up there, on the middle toe, there is Señor Cardoni's gold mine. See! His buildings, eh?"

Jerry Stevens opened his eyes and stared eagerly at the spot to which Jadiz pointed. High up on the mountain-side, as if they had been painted against the sun-reddened granite, was a cluster of buildings. They were grayish red, and grouped on the tip of a ledge from which they seemed certain to topple into the cañon hundreds of feet below, unless, indeed, they were only the painted fancy of an artist.

"The so big building is Señor Cardoni's house," Joe Jadiz explained. "*La casa grande*! In it he has the hell of a time. Heh-heh! Look close above it and you can see the shaft house of the mine. Do you see it, *señor*? The mine gallows, too—it looks like the skeleton of a big man standing there, eh?"

The simile seemed to please Joe Jadiz, for he chuckled to himself before he resumed his explanation.

"But that is not why it is called the Skeleton Mine. No. Señor Cardoni says that in the cañon below the mine he found a pile of bones. That was when he was running cattle in Duck-foot Cañon. A man's bones, bleached white. And one hand pointed up at that ledge where Señor Cardoni dug and found his mine."

Once more Joe Jadiz chuckled to himself, then added: "But some people think, *señor*, that the bones were found after Cardoni began to dig; some people say that it was an old desert rat, a prospector called Silver John who found the so rich mine, and that Silver John fell off the ledge one night when Señor Cardoni was up there. Heh, heh! Just a fool's tale, eh? But the Skeleton Mine, is it not a good name?"

"The name's all right," commented Jerry Stevens shortly. "Has Cardoni a family up there?"

Joe Jadiz shrugged his shoulders in true Mexican fashion. "Who knows, *señor*? But no, he lives alone. Except for Toby, the so-big Piute. He stays in the big house with Señor Cardoni; he is Señor Cardoni's right hand and his fist and one watchful eye. He is one devil of a man, that big Piute buck called Toby. Heh-heh, they make a good pair, Cardoni and Toby!"

Again the half-breed laughed within himself as if he had his own secret little joke.

CHAPTER II.

THE SKELETON MINE.

AROUND the last switch-back curve the two desert mares tugged at last and with unexpected suddenness the big-wheeled buckboard pulled up among the buildings of the Skeleton Mine.

Dusk was rapidly waning. High above, the mountain peaks were gilded

by the setting sun; below them purple shadows were racing across the desert, covering it with a curiously opaque veil. Far to the eastward a single narrow strip of golden sunlight remained; it faded rapidly, while the mountains to the west became constantly blacker, more foreboding.

The buildings perched there on the ledge lost their outlines, became merely black blotches. They seemed strangely silent, mysterious, the abode of only the dead. Beyond them the mine galls reared against the mountainside, gaunt, gibbous, ghostly, gray. No curl of smoke came from the Piute shacks in the rear of the owner's house, no sound of voices or activity. The huge house of Cardoni squatted silently among the other buildings like a brooding animal over its young. All the windows and doors were tightly closed; vaguely they reminded Jerry Stevens of the blind eye-sockets he had once seen in a rotten old skull.

Something of the deathly silence of the place crept into the young man's spirit; he felt uneasy, threatened by some unnatural calamity; he wished to shout, whistle, do anything which would break that eerie spell. Joe Jadiz, too, seemed momentarily daunted. He sat motionless and wordless in the old buckboard, a cigarette between his fingers. He was waiting, waiting.

Jerry Stevens cleared his throat noisily. "Where do you suppose they all are?" he demanded.

"Heh, they're down in the mine, *señor*," Jadiz answered. "The mine, always in the mine, eh?"

"Well, let's go over and rouse them out," Stevens suggested.

With an effort he threw off the mental miasma which the place inspired, and climbed from the buckboard.

Suddenly he thought he heard muffled voices; there was a distant rumbling, then a gasoline engine sputtered noisily. Immediately began the nerve-racking shriek and groan of a steel cable sliding on a drum. The bedlam

of sound after the utter silence, the sinister way the noise harmonized with the weird place and his own mood, stopped Jerry Stevens in his tracks.

Up out of the shaft twisted the cable, like a black snake, writhing from its hole. Then the horn-like top braces of a cage appeared, gleaming in a yellow light. Framed between the braces was a man's head; above his forehead, like a single, gleaming eye, a miner's oil lamp cut a shadowy circle in the gloom. Rapidly the man's body came into view, huge and black like some subterranean giant arising from the realms of Pluto into the half-light of men and gods.

THE cage jerked to a stop and the gigantic man stepped off; again it swayed upward and a second figure appeared on the lower platform, a figure almost as large as the first. He, too, stepped to the ground beside the shaft; the whining shriek of the cable ceased, the sputter of the little engine was silenced.

Now, for the first time, they saw the figure of Jerry Stevens awaiting them. They stopped instantly and their hands flashed gray-white to the battered holsters at their sides. For a moment waves of mutual suspicion and distrust eddied through the gloom; then the first man saw the outline of Joe Jadiz and his buckboard in the background and he stepped forward.

"Mr. Stevens?" he asked, forcing a measure of cordiality into his booming bass voice. "Mr. Stevens? Good! I'm Henry Cardoni. I was rather expecting you, but when you didn't get here earlier I decided you had been delayed for a day."

The man's enunciation was studiously perfect, but his words had a faintly foreign Latin accent. As he spoke he thrust out a huge, hamlike hand. Its grip was crushing, and with it he swung Jerry Stevens hastily away from the shaft and toward the house.

"Come!" he ordered. "You're

just in time to eat with us. Toby," he added over his shoulder, "tell Tita that the white man has come."

The big Piute foreman disappeared as if the gloom had swallowed him, and Cardoni marched his guest toward the front of *la casa grande*. A moment later the two stumbled up a few short steps and a door was flung open, emitting a blast of musty air.

"Here we are," called Cardoni. A match flickered, followed immediately by the white glare of an air-pumped gasoline lamp.

For the first time Jerry Stevens had opportunity to study Henry Cardoni. The man was of Brobdingnagian size. His arms and shoulders, bare, and red from oxide stain, bulged with muscle; his chest was immensely broad and thick and matted with hair. Long arms ended in huge hands, and his legs, incased in high boots, were pillarlike. But it was Cardoni's face which fascinated Jerry Stevens. He attempted to understand why it was so startling.

The features were huge, yes, but not out of keeping with his great body; they were rough-hewn as rock and surmounted by a mass of black hair which had not been barbered for weeks and trailed over his ears like a blanket. His face was only slightly hirsute; under the black stubble the skin was brick-colored except for blotches of dirt and grease.

The eyes! They dominated the face, gave it that weird appearance. They were yellow eyes, startling yellow like a wolf's; in them gleamed an odd, animal-like intensity, a brutal fierceness, a determination which would brook no denial; yet in them was much intelligence, thoughtfulness.

Cardoni, conscious that his guest was studying him, bore the scrutiny well. "And what do you think of me?" he asked with disarming frankness.

"Why—why—" Jerry Stevens, ordinarily quick-witted enough, was lost for words to answer the direct question.

"Well, I'm really not so bad," bantered Cardoni with heavy humor. Quickly he sobered again; his jaw thrust out and those odd yellow eyes seemed to burn. "And I'm a worker! Remember that! A worker!" He pounded his great chest with his fist. "A worker with my body and with my mind, a merciless worker! God help those who don't work when I'm around!"

"I can see that," Stevens agreed. "You have quite a place here, Cardoni. 'Dobe, isn't it?"

The man's momentary dramatics ceased. He answered very quietly. "Yes. 'Dobe over thick stone walls. Cool in summer, warm in winter. Built by Piute labor, and well built, for I watched every stone. But come! I'll show you your room."

"JADIZ has my bags in the buckboard," Jerry Stevens reminded his domineering host. "I haven't paid him for the trip, either."

"I'll take care of Jadiz," Cardoni promised. He picked up a gasoline lamp and led the way from the large, low living room with its stone fireplace into a hall. Down it he went and opened the second door to the right. "This is your room, Mr. Stevens," he said graciously, placing the lamp on the table. "Mine is right next. Make yourself comfortable while I get your luggage."

Jerry Stevens glanced around him. The room promised to be surprisingly comfortable. It was fairly large and furnished with a new iron bed, a bureau, a table and two large chairs. Everything was spotlessly clean, yet that air of mustiness and disuse permeated the place. Two windows opened to the east; they were small and recessed deeply in walls which were almost two feet thick.

After a cursory survey of the room, Stevens crossed over and stared out into the night. Directly in front of the window and less than fifty yards

away he saw Cardoni and Joe Jadiz. The mine owner was holding a second lamp high in the air; its peculiar white light cut a calcium circle in the darkness and cast weird shadows against the mountain wall. Jadiz was still seated in the buckboard; compared to the gigantic Cardoni he seemed very small and insignificant.

Obviously the two men were arguing out there in the night; the rumble of their voices came through the closed windows. Suddenly Cardoni placed the lamp on the ground and loomed threateningly over the livery man from Cactus Siding. Words sounded, broken sentences: "Ten dollars a head—damned cent more," and the shriller answer from Joe Jadiz: "Get you—trouble—*señor*—"

More words, and then one of the long arms of Henry Cardoni shot through space; it encircled Joe Jadiz, lifted him from the buckboard, over the big wheels, and threw him to the ground.

"*Basta! Basta!*" shrilled the half-breed to the man who stood over him so threateningly. "Stop! *Sí, sí*, you are right! *Cuerpo de Dios*, I meant nothing!" His voice quavered with mortal fear, and Jerry Stevens, watching from the window, was tempted to run to the fellow's assistance. But Cardoni laughed suddenly and picked up that huge barrel-like Mexican again. As if it were a sack of feathers he tossed it back into the buckboard. For a moment his booming voice beat like a bass drum, and Joe Jadiz seemed to shrink visibly before the onslaught of words.

"*Sí, sí!*" the driver stammered again and again. He hastily handed down Stevens's suitcases and then whirled his mares around and back down the switchback as if a devil were pursuing him.

Cardoni tucked one suitcase under his right arm, picked up the other and the lamp and strode back to the house. Jerry Stevens left the window quickly,

and when his host entered the room he was waiting at the door.

"Here are your bags, Mr. Stevens," Cardoni announced quietly. "Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes."

"Did you—did you pay Jadiz?" Jerry Stevens couldn't refrain from asking the question.

"Yes, I gave him ten dollars."

"But I promised him twenty-five."

"So he said," Cardoni smiled grimly. "However, ten was enough, and he was glad to get it. Dinner in twenty minutes."

CHAPTER III.

A BATTLE BELOW GROUND.

WHEN Jerry Stevens returned to the living room twenty minutes later he was astounded at the man he found awaiting him there.

Henry Cardoni had apparently bathed, shaved and donned a dinner suit in those few moments. His mop of black hair was sleeked back from his brown face; the tuxedo, with its snowy shirt and black bow tie, was exceedingly well fitted. Momentarily he looked more like a distinguished Spanish or Italian diplomat or a foreign musician than the hard-fisted, hard-working mine owner of the daylight hours. When Jerry Stevens entered the room he turned cheerfully; even his yellow eyes smiled.

"My one gesture," he announced apologetically. "Dressing for dinner, I mean. God knows I'm barbaric enough! This is the only way I remember that there is such a thing as civilization."

The dinner was an odd meal, served in absolute silence by Tita, the Piute woman. The appointments were perfect; snowy linen, glittering silver and crystal. Between the courses—chili soup, fresh beef which was served with many vegetables, all highly spiced, and the sweet pastry with coffee—Jerry Stevens watched the Piute woman.

Tita moved with the automatonlike action of a sleepwalker. She was not old, not past thirty-five, but already her face was ageless, her eyes dead and her body had an odd baglike shapelessness. Across her right cheek was a livid, crescent-shaped scar. Stevens noticed that her eyes never met those of Cardoni, and when his voice boomed out she recoiled and cringed visibly. There was something strange in the relations between the pair, something which the guest couldn't fathom. Was Cardoni perhaps a "squaw man"? Was this abject woman merely a slave to his whims? Had he broken her with that brutal will of his?

Stevens gave up the problem, finding that he needed all his thoughts to keep abreast of Cardoni's conversation. The mine owner was astoundingly well read and thoughtful. One thing Stevens noticed, however—whatever the subject of conversation, art or war, sports or diplomacy, Cardoni eventually twisted the theme toward wealth and gold. Obviously the man was obsessed with that strange disease, gold fever.

IN the living room after dinner, Cardoni placed a small table before the open fireplace. He took from a corner cabinet a canvas sack of rock. Slowly he up-ended it on the table top. Gold gleamed there, yellow and glistening against the gangue, or black and heavy. Cardoni took the richest of it in his huge hands and fingered it caressingly. His yellow eyes lighted, became as glittering as the gold itself.

"Ah, the wonderful metal!" he crooned. "The basis of all riches!" He straightened and one huge hand hit his chest. "And I—I possess my full share of it."

"Tell me about your mine," urged Jerry Stevens. His imagination had been fired by the rich ore and Cardoni's words; perhaps he, too, would share in those great riches. "How do you work it? What can I do to help? When do I start my survey?"

The man was silent for a moment; that sardonic smile carved his face. "Ah, you can help indeed!" he murmured slowly. "You will get much gold for me." Suddenly his great black head snapped back and he stared at Stevens. His intentness was almost mesmerizing; words poured from him.

"A great mine, indeed!" he crowed, and Jerry Stevens wondered if he detected a false enthusiasm in the man's voice. "One of the world's richest! Listen, Stevens! There is ore down that shaft which will run a thousand dollars to the ton. Most of it assays more than two hundred dollars! And there are hundreds of tons. Hundreds upon hundreds of tons! Wealth is there, fabulous wealth."

His voice lowered. "We have but one problem, that of getting the ore out of the ground and to the market. Labor! That's where you must help me, where you will help me. To-morrow we'll go down into the mine. You will see for yourself. Then you will start your work."

With a sudden gesture he broke off the conversation. "To-night, Mr. Stevens, to-night we will try to forget the mine. I live too much with it. We will talk of your work, eh?"

Believing that his worth was being tested, Jerry Stevens told of his experiences on the Mesabi range of Minnesota, in the gold fields of Nevada and Utah, among copper mines in Michigan and Arizona, Brazil and Mexico—those far-flung posts that many mining engineers have visited by the time they reach thirty. Cardoni encouraged the conversation by adding a few words from time to time, particularly when gold mining was the subject; he seemed most interested in new gold fields, distant fields.

About ten o'clock footsteps sounded along the side of the house; they moved toward the front door. Instantly Cardoni rose, checking his guest in the middle of a word. "Excuse me for a

moment," he begged. "I almost forgot. It is one of the nights I take some exercise!"

"Exercise?" echoed Jerry Stevens, thinking of the tremendous labor the man must perform during the day. "Exercise?" But his host had already moved from the room.

Those steps outside, the clatter of loose rock and rasp of sand, sounded closer; they padded on the front steps, up them. The door opened. Into the room slid Toby, the huge Piute foreman, Cardoni's "right fist and one eye," as Joe Jadiz called him.

IN the gloom of the earlier evening Jerry Stevens had not been able to see the fellow clearly. Now the man's appearance startled and vaguely frightened him. He had that feeling of horror, repulsion, which all normally healthy people feel for the deformed and maimed.

Toby was almost as big as his master, but Cardoni was splendidly proportioned while the Piute was a racked caricature of a man. His arms and legs were gorillalike in their great length and their stringy ridges of muscle. Great, bulging shoulders almost met over a thin and flat chest. Like the woman Tita, his face was so emaciated that the contour of his skull showed clearly and the cheek bones seemed about to break through the brown skin.

One jet eye glittered beadily and with a strange fierceness; the other had a white film over it—the film of blindness. Most sinister of all was the manner in which the Piute's face twisted to the left, as if his head had been put in a powerful press and forcibly warped. His aquiline nose, obviously broken several times, angled across his cheek, his mouth quirked downward and even his jaw seemed depressed. Barefoot, clad only in a thin shirt and short trousers, Toby appeared to be a freak ready for display in a side-show rather than a human being, a mine foreman. As he padded catlike across

the room, Jerry Stevens was tempted to turn and run.

The hall door opened and Cardoni reappeared. He had thrown off his dinner dress and was clad only in white trunks. His muscled limbs and magnificent torso were clearly revealed, the body of a giant.

"All ready, Toby!" he called sternly, moving across and picking up one of the gasoline lamps. "You may come, too, if you wish, Mr. Stevens."

Down the hall again Cardoni led the way; he opened a door at the far end and descended into a cubical basement room. It was wholly unfinished, merely a cleared space under the rafters which supported the floor above, bounded on three sides by stone walls and on the fourth by a bank of unexcavated dirt. In the dirt Cardoni placed the lamp and motioned Jerry Stevens to a place beside it.

"All ready, Toby!" Cardoni called again, whirling toward the Piute.

Jerry Stevens, eyes wide, wondered what strange exhibition he was about to witness in this subterranean place of mystery. He sensed a grim fierceness in the attitude of both men, a deadly intensity. This was no mere exercise, no sparring match, that was certain. Something terrifically important seemed to be at stake. He caught his breath, half-convinced already that life or death was the prize. Why? When would the strange fight start and how would it end?

He had not long to wait. The gorillalike Piute had crouched low; now he came sliding toward his master who stood waiting, legs wide apart, bare fists clenched in front of him. Suddenly Toby slashed out with his long right arm; Cardoni moved quickly aside and took the blow on his shoulder. His own fist flashed out in turn; it smacked against Toby's twisted left jaw and swung him half around. It was followed by another blow, another—short devastating jabs which forced the Piute to duck his face protectively behind

his hands and back rapidly away, grunting with pain.

"**C**OME on, you brown devil!" boomed Henry Cardoni, and obediently Toby leaped to the attack again.

Jerry Stevens, standing beside the gasoline lamp, was held spellbound by the weird scene in that basement room. It might well have been a vision from a nightmare. There stood the giant Cardoni, almost naked, his white body gleaming with perspiration, his great, hair-covered chest rising and falling rapidly, his yellow eyes as keen and wary as a wild animal's. At him charged the big Piute, tall and awkward and copper-colored. His maimed face was turned aside so that his one good eye, glittering snakelike, always bore on his master; his long arms cut brown arcs in the white light.

Bare knuckles crunched on flesh, bodies reeled, lungs labored, gasps and grunts of pain sounded. From under shifting feet a cloud of red dust rose and hung motionless in the dry air. On the far wall the projected shadows of the fighters, gigantically elongated, danced and shifted crazily.

The fight was too vicious and too one-sided to last long. Cardoni was always master of the situation; he warded blows almost automatically; he struck back with the machinelike precision and strength of a piston. Already the big Piute was reeling groggily. Constantly the white man rained blows on Toby's single glittering eye; gradually the flesh around it puffed until only a shining black slit remained.

One last charge from Toby, one final hurricane of blows, and then Cardoni, who had stood with his pillarlike legs wide-stretched, suddenly leaped forward. His right arm flashed, his fist smacked against the Indian's face. For a moment Toby swung back and forth on his heels, an expression of childish surprise on his maimed face. Blood began to flow from a cut above his left

eye; it was closed now. Farther and farther he swayed; another fierce blow from Cardoni and with a final desperate pawing at the air the beaten Piute slumped to the floor.

Without a word Cardoni turned and picked up the gasoline lamp. There was no expression of triumph or satisfaction upon his face, no mark of Toby's blows on his white body. Only the bellowslike swelling of his great chest showed what he had endured.

Up the stairs he led the way, leaving Toby in the darkness, warped on the dirt floor of the cellar. Jerry Stevens followed, bewilderment and uncanny awe holding him silent. At the bedroom door he paused.

"Listen, Cardoni!" he cried. "That fight! What was it? It was something deadly. Deadly. It wasn't mere exercise, wasn't mere fun!"

"Fun?" echoed Cardoni. Expression came again to his face, the old flash to his yellow eyes, the sardonic smile. "Not quite fun, perhaps! And sometime, Stevens, sometime Toby may win. Then the fun is over, eh? Over forever!" He spread his arms expressively. "Until then—well, Toby has his code, and I have mine."

CHAPTER IV.

DOWN INTO DARKNESS.

JERRY STEVENS lay motionless in his bed, motionless by force of will. His long body was rigid, his fists were clenched. Sleep had not come, would not come.

Outside, the desert moon had climbed above the eastern mountains and a ghastly blue-white light flooded the Skeleton Mine house and its environs of cañon and rocks, mine machinery and shacks. The bright rays beat on the tiled floor, making squares which gradually became rectangles.

The rectangles narrowed. Many minutes passed, and yet the guest of Henry Cardoni could not sleep. Once

he sat bolt upright in bed; he was certain that somewhere out in that blue-white night many voices had sounded, dull and muffled and rumbling as if they issued from some subterranean cavern. His senses, keyed beyond reason, waited expectantly for further sound or action. Nothing happened, and at last, wearied by the tense vigil, he threw himself back on the pillow again.

Scene by scene he reviewed the events of the day, but always his thoughts concentrated on that last weird scene in the basement, the desperate bare-fisted attack of Toby upon Cardoni. What did it mean? And what part did the cringing, silent Tita play in that drama? He recalled the mine owner's last words: "Toby has his code and I have mine. Sometime Toby may win and then the fun is over, forever."

His thought seized that single clew, analyzed it. Gradually certain convictions came to him, convictions which he felt were unbelievable, but which yet refused to be discarded. Cardoni controlled Toby by the power of his mind and the power of his body. That was it. Absolute mental and physical control. The Indian's mind was weak; Cardoni's terrible in its strength. Toby's body was strong; Cardoni's was stronger, and he ruled.

And the Piute rebelled, attempted to throw off the domination, a domination which perhaps included the woman, 'Tita.' Maybe other unnamed, unseen persons were involved. If so, Toby was their champion. Certainly he was struggling against fate—and Cardoni. But why didn't the Piute, or Tita, use a stiletto or poisoned food; hadn't such means occurred to them, or did the strange code prevent it?

Jerry's thoughts were checked suddenly. There was motion directly below him; he could sense it. He raised his head and listened. A body dragged slowly over the ground; a moment later footsteps padded on the cellar

stairs. Toby, of course, come back to life again. A moment later the front door opened and closed creakily. Toby had gone out into the blue-white night.

ONCE more Jerry Stevens threw himself back on his pillows, absolutely determined to sleep. A moment later he was up again, to brace a chair under the door knob. He attempted a grin at his precaution, at his own foolish state of funk, but when he realized that his body was wet with the perspiration of nervousness and his hand was shaking violently he made no further effort at bravado.

Turning back to his bed he stopped suddenly, and again his heart leaped wildly. There was a head in one of the windows, a face staring at him. The round black blotch was silhouetted against the moon. It was not Toby; it was not Cardoni or Tita.

"Hello!" The cry was wrenched from him. Involuntarily he crouched and stepped forward as if to fight off danger.

The head disappeared, dropped from sight. After a moment of unreasoning panic he crossed quickly to the window and stared out. A slight figure was flitting across the moonlit area between the ranch house and the mine gallows. A low, elfin-like laughter echoed back. It was not Tita, but certainly it was a woman or a girl, quick and graceful. She looked like an Indian.

Out in the desert night sounded a series of explosions. Loud, staccato as a machine gun they were at first, only gradually slowing to the steady *put-put-put* of a powerful gasoline motor. There seemed to be an overtone, too, of strangely muffled voices.

"Toby is starting his tractor train!"

The thought flashed through the mind of Jerry Stevens. It should have been reassuring, but it was not. He pictured the great, maimed Piute, blind in one eye, the other beaten shut, guiding the snorting, roaring tractor

and its train of eight wagons down the switchbacks and across the desert miles.

A PERSISTENT rapping at his door aroused Jerry Stevens from the restless sleep which had come to him just before dawn.

"It's Cardoni," sounded that booming voice from outside the door. "I have some mine clothes for you."

Stevens leaped from the bed, pulled the chair from the door and faced his host rather shamefacedly.

"A few precautions, eh?" the man asked good-naturedly, indicating the chair. "Don't know that I blame you. Here are some hip-boots and some old clothes I dug up. We get a little seepage from the higher peaks and plenty of oxide in the mine; ruins anything you wear."

"Much obliged," Stevens declared, taking the proffered garments. "I'll be ready in a jiff."

"Good. It'll be half an hour before breakfast; Tita is out of sorts this morning. I thought we might make a quick survey of the mine at once."

Within five minutes Jerry Stevens, in old gray clothes which were barely long enough, but much too full, was walking with Henry Cardoni toward the mine shaft.

"Is Toby back yet?" he asked, to make conversation.

"Heavens, no!" Cardoni replied. "Not before midnight at the earliest. He's to bring some gasoline and food supplies. By the way," he added with studied casualness, "have you any relatives who might worry about you? You see, mail is very uncertain out here; hard to get and hard to send. So if any one is waiting word from you we ought to make arrangements—"

"Why, no," Stevens interrupted. "Except for an old aunt I have no near relatives, and she is accustomed to long silences from me. A mining engineer, you know, is apt to move like a straw in a hurricane."

Cardoni nodded and his yellow eyes flashed. Obviously he was pleased at the reply. A moment later he was priming the gasoline hoisting engine in the shaft house. Under his capable hands it began to sputter obediently. Stevens remained outside to study the shaft and its little car. He was surprised at the primitiveness of the mine—merely a square hole in the ground sided with thick, upright planks and occasional cross-braces.

The cage caught his eye. It was a square box suspended from a steel cable; it had two platforms, the lower one of which was inclosed for the height of two feet in order to carry the ore to the surface.

Overhead was the gallows frame with its great sheaf wheel; beside the shaft house was the steel drum, geared to the hoisting engine, upon which the cable wound or unwound as the cage raised or was lowered. A wire loop controlled the engine and its rotating drum.

"Not particularly safe," suggested Stevens, indicating the arrangement to Cardoni as the latter stepped from the shaft house.

"Perhaps not to an engineer," the mine owner agreed easily. "But as long as the cable holds—"

"But some time you will get down and your engine won't pull you up. What then?"

"Climb the cable. Or wait until Toby comes to pull us up. Shall we go down? You take the lower platform, please."

Jerry Stevens stepped on the rickety cage. Upward around him swept a blast of cold, damp air from the mine. The cable screeched, the drum revolved complainingly. Instantly he was plunged into darkness. A short drop only, and then the cage jerked to a stop and he heard Cardoni step from the surface onto the upper platform of the cage above his head. Again the descent began, rapid, breath-taking this time. The air became colder, wetter.

He could hear water dripping from the plank shafting beside him. With an engineer's instinct, he attempted to estimate the depth of the mine. Eighty or ninety feet, perhaps. Why had Cardoni dug so deeply in just that place? There must have been an outcropping on the cañon wall, or at least the telltale stain of oxide to indicate the gold-bearing vein.

THE descent slowed, then the cage stopped with a bouncing jerkiness.

"Step off!" came the order from Cardoni. The words echoed hollowly. "Step off! Quick!"

The young engineer felt for footing, then leaped from the cage into a side drift which he could barely see. He was in mid-air when a scream sounded in his ears—a girl's voice, shrill, almost hysterical in its imperiousness:

"Don't! Get back! Climb back!"

Jerry Stevens whirled toward the cage. But instead of descending farther to let Cardoni climb off from the upper platform, it had started rapidly upward again, bumping from side to side of the shaft. Jerry leaped for it, strove to catch hold, but its ascent was too rapid. His fingers missed; he plunged downward through space. Even as he fell he thought he heard Cardoni's sardonic laughter high above him. Then came a splash and the breath-taking impact of his body on water and rock. Instantly blackness edged in on him and burst like a balloon.

Only momentarily was Jerry Stevens dazed. The thought flashed through his mind that he had pitched into the pit, only eight or ten feet deep, which had been dug to allow the cage to descend until its top platform was level with the main drift. He wondered, in a single second, why the pit was not full of water, why the mine itself was not submerged from the moisture which dripped so audibly around him. He remembered no pump, no siphon.

"Must run off, must follow a fissure

into Duckfoot Cañon," he decided impersonally. "Lord, what mining conditions! What luck for Cardoni!"

He rose to his feet, wiping the water from his face and eyes and testing his arms and legs to make certain that nothing had broken in that sudden fall. He was beginning now to think logically, but he could not grasp the significance of events: Cardoni's sudden desertion, that wild, feminine cry, his own foolish attempt to climb back into the cage. He put out his hands and felt the smooth, wet walls of the pit; immediately all other thoughts left him in his instinctive desire to climb out of that black hole. He sought a handhold, a foothold.

"Oh, oh! Are you hurt?"

It was the girl's voice again, directly overhead this time. He could barely make out the white oval of a face in the blackness just above him. A surge of anger swept through him.

"For the love of God, what's all this foolishness about?" he demanded. "Who the devil—"

"Oh, then you aren't hurt!" He sensed the relief in the girl's voice. Another white oval appeared up there, another face staring down at him. Then orders came in a hoarse tone:

"Jump and catch my hands! I'll pull you up."

Stevens leaped for two small white spots he saw above him; strong fingers caught his; he clambered and pushed with his feet and slowly surmounted the pit wall. Over its edge he pitched, then leaped immediately to his feet.

Around him he imagined many figures were moving, but the darkness was too thick to distinguish them. Instinctively his hand went to the pocket in which he had placed some matches. He attempted to strike one; it was wet, and, with a muttered exclamation of disgust, he dropped it. A second was dry but refused to light on his soaked clothes; the third he scratched under his thumb nail and its yellow glow cut a circle in the blackness.

Instantly screams of surprise and agony sounded, muffled orders and oaths. Jerry Stevens had a fleeting image of six or seven people, white faces streaked with black and red, backing away from him, their hands thrown protectively before their eyes.

"Put it out!" came the one coherent order out of the jumble of words and cries.

"God, you're killing our eyes!"

A fist slashed out and knocked the match from his hand.

"What the devil!" muttered Jerry Stevens again. "What's the big idea?"

HIS unspoken wonder was more intense than his words. What was this weird half-world into which he had fallen, this subterranean region where white people, men and women, screamed at the mere flash of light? What cave-dwellers were these?

"Say!" he blurted again. "What's it all about?"

"You're one more slave for Henry Cardoni, that's what it's about," came the answer from the darkness.

"A cigarette!" shrilled another voice. "*Madre mía*, my soul for a cigarette!"

"But—" Jerry Stevens started to protest.

"For heaven's sake give Chico his cigarette, if you've got one! Then come on along and we'll tell you all about it. We don't start slaving until after breakfast, and that'll give us time enough to break your heart with what has happened to you."

As he spoke, the man moved ahead in the darkness. Stevens, his eyes becoming more accustomed to the black drift, followed. Around him pressed other people; he could hear the rustle of a dress and a girl's low whispering to a companion.

The leader stopped after traversing a hundred feet of dark passage, during which he instinctively dodged several crude stull timbers. "This is where we live," he announced curtly. "It's

the one dry place. Sit down on some blankets you'll find if you feel around. But don't start asking questions. Save your breath. We know what you want to find out, and we'll tell you."

"First let me light another match and look around me," Stevens begged. "Let me see who's talking and—and all you others."

"All right. We'll cover our eyes and you can light up. Only don't ever light another match without telling us first! It's like sticking knives into us! Ready! Light up!"

Never had his hands seemed so awkward to Jerry Stevens, never were matches so stupidly recalcitrant. The drift was drafty, too, and the first feeble blaze was extinguished as if by a giant's breath. At last a palm-cupped light revealed his surroundings and his strange companions.

He was in a subterranean room not a dozen feet square, a room cut from decomposed granite. Its ceiling was barely head high, its floor uneven and strewn with blankets. In one corner was a pile of tin dishes, but no other sign of habitation was visible. In the passage beyond, like sentinels on guard, he could see the great stull timbers. But it was not the bleak black cavern which claimed the amazed attention of Jerry Stevens; it was the people in it.

Eight of them there were, seven men and a girl; all pitiable sights. Their faces, the unhealthy blue-white of fungus growth, were streaked with dirt and red oxide; their clothes were mere rags, their bodies cadaverous. He could imagine their eyes peering from the caverns in their skulls, could see the lines which exhaustion and starvation had etched on their faces.

The girl alone seemed a healthy, normal human being. Perhaps because she was younger, perhaps because she had been spared the worst privations, she seemed to Jerry Stevens a glowing orchid in this noisome swamp of humanity. Her hair, gold-glinting, caught and held the light of his match; her

face was unstreaked, unlined, and her features were regular and charming.

As if she knew she were being studied by the light of the match, a wistful half-smile flickered across her curving lips and she tossed her head, revealing the regal curve of her throat. She was very small in stature, yet every line of her body suggested self-reliance.

"Damn!" The match had burned Stevens's fingers. Much he had seen in that brief moment of light, but he wished further opportunity to study these people, particularly the girl who had tried to warn him of his peril, who had been the first to run to his aid.

"If you've finished your inspection of our rat's nest, we'll break the good news to you," suggested the spokesman, whom Stevens remembered now as a stern-featured man whose gray hair had become red-tinged from oxide stain and whose clothes hung baglike from a withering body. "Maybe you can suggest some way to beat the game. If you can't—well, you might better know now that another thirty days will finish most of us!"

"Go ahead!" ordered Jerry Stevens stoically. He was prepared for anything after the succeeding shocks of the past ten minutes.

"Dad," sounded the girl's voice, "let Paul Harvey tell it. He was the first one here, you know, and he understands it all better than we do. He saw Cardoni for two days; we barely saw him at all."

"All right, Harvey it is! Tell the newcomer, Harve, what particular part of hell he's dropped into."

CHAPTER V.

SLAVES.

A COUGH sounded in the darkness hollow and racking. A man cleared his voice, coughed again, then spoke. His voice was weak and husky; apparently the damp mine was seriously affecting his lungs.

"Yep, I was the first. Thirty-four days ago I got into this hell hole. I came like the others who followed me, in answer to an advertisement in *The Drift*, a mining paper. Probably you did, too, eh? 'Engineer wanted to increase production in a great gold mine.' Good joke! But I was sick of working for the Kellys in Arizona, so I answered. Cardoni, the hellion, wrote back, and in two weeks I was here. He was in earnest about increasing production and I made a survey for him. At the end of two days I gave him the answer: 'Not enough ore in the vein to warrant expensive machinery; all that is needed is labor, a little dynamite, and yet more labor.' An honest report. But Cardoni went wild.

"'Labor!' he yelled at me. 'Well, try to get it! Except for the worthless Piutes who eat more than they produce, I can't get a man to stay a week! And even the Piutes run away regularly; last week I had twenty; to-day not a one left!' Then he swore in some outlandish language. All the time he got madder until I thought he was going to kill me. Instead, he grabbed me by the neck all of a sudden and poked an automatic into my side. 'Not enough ore for machinery, eh?' he yelled. 'Just need labor, eh? Well, I'm getting it! You're the first!'"

Harvey coughed, then continued in leaden tones: "Five minutes later, I was down here with a pick and a drill and a sledge, afraid for my life. Cardoni and that big Toby worked beside me and if I stopped for breath one of them would prod me with a crowbar. At that, it wasn't so bad as it is now; then we had some light, and now just a match murders our eyes. Yep, I've been working this mine for Cardoni for thirty-four days. It seems like thirty-four years, and I'm almost done!"

Again came a racking paroxysm of coughing, then momentary silence in the black cavern. The man called "Dad" took up the story. Obviously,

his age and experience made him leader of that forlorn band of human moles.

"The rest of us came along by ones and twos," he declared, "all in answer to that advertisement and the promises in Cardoni's letters. My daughter, Jacquith and I were the fifth party. He got us down here, like he did the rest, on pretense of a survey. Then he left us here to work."

"Good God!" interjected Jerry Stevens. "Are you so many sheep? Why don't you fight? Why don't you beat him up? Why don't you escape?"

Two or three figures in the blackness laughed mirthlessly. "That's what we thought when we first came," one of them said. "But it's no good."

"Why?"

"Because we are at his mercy down here. You'll see why soon enough! The convict mines of Alabama are nothing to this. And Cardoni never even comes near us any more. He never leaves the upper platform of the cage; just stands there with an automatic for hours at a time to see that we work. Sometimes Toby joins us with his blinding lamp, and generally he hits a couple of us insanely. But Cardoni has sworn that if we attack Toby he'll shoot every one of us down. He'd do it, too, the black-hearted devil! Buck Davis tried it; he hit back once, and got a bullet through the arm. But he had to keep working just the same."

"**B**UT why don't you rush the cage sometime?" Jerry Stevens insisted. "Pile on the lower platform? Break it to pieces and get Cardoni?"

"Sounds easy!" It was Dad Burrell speaking again. "We tried that once and were half-killed. And we did better than that; we hid Harve, here, under a pile of ore on the lower platform, thinking he could get to the surface that way and put up a fight for us. But Harve never got to the surface. Cardoni ran the cage up and

stepped off the upper platform, but he left Harve in the shaft, blocked in there. All day and night he left him, pounding at the cage and shafting. Once in awhile that devil had Toby pour water down. Harve was almost drowned and nearly died of exposure, too. That's where he got that awful cold. And all the time the rest of us were without food. When the fiend lowered the cage twenty-four hours later, Harve was glad to climb off. We haven't tried that again. Besides, now he has Toby jab a sharpened crowbar into every load of ore that goes up."

"But at least," Jerry Stevens persisted, "you could refuse to work and make Cardoni let you out that way."

"We could, eh?" old Dad demanded. "Well, don't think we haven't made a stab at it! And got spanked for it, too. No food, I mean. Starvation. Yep, he starved us back to work. Now it's a ton of ore a day for each of us; that's what we carry out, or we don't get even the slop he calls food. God, it's awful! Twelve, fourteen, even twenty hours working like fiends in the darkness to get out enough!"

"A ton a day!" Jerry Stevens echoed. "Miss Jacquith, too? Does she have to stay down here and work like you men?"

There was no answer. The silence was oddly breathless. Through the cold, damp blackness swept a strange wave of fear, of repulsion, of cold determination. Jerry Stevens could almost feel the way his companions' faces hardened, almost hear the click of their jaws. Obviously he had stumbled on a sore subject, a fearful nightmare in this place of nightmares. Instinctively he changed the subject.

"Your relatives and friends!" he cried, with an effort at cheerfulness. "Surely they'll trace you here before long and effect your release!"

"You don't know Cardoni yet, and his devilish ingenuity," Dad Burrell declared venomously. "He has received our mail and sent all of it back

with notes saying we had left here to work in some little mining town in the hinterland of Brazil. Probably he asked you, too, about your relatives, eh? Innocent as a lamb, the devil! God, how that fiend gloated and laughed when he told us about the notes he sent! He knows it 'll take months to trace us in Brazil and find that we aren't there. By that time—" He ceased speaking suddenly.

"By that time, what?" insisted Jerry Stevens.

"We'll all be dead. Or else we'll have the ore all out of here and Cardoni will have skipped. We're getting out better than eight tons a day and the vein is pinching out. Unless, God help us, we uncover another vein, there's not more than five hundred tons left. Harve says seven hundred, but the rest of us agree, after feeling it over, that two months more may finish it."

"SUPPOSE Cardoni skips, what then?" demanded Jerry Stevens, determined to get a clear picture of all eventualities in his mind. "Will he let you out?"

"Not Cardoni! He'll want plenty of chance to make a clean get-away with the hundreds of thousands he's made. Probably he'll let us die like rats down here; at most he'd give us one little chance to work our way out in a week or two after he left, if we live. And that's not likely. We're getting weaker every day, and—listen!"

Through the cavernous blackness vibrated a sudden banging and rattling, a sound which Jerry Stevens was to learn well in the days which followed—the crude cage bumping from side to side in the shaft.

"Breakfast!" choked the man called Harve. "Breakfast!"

Instantly the nine-dwellers were on their feet; they pounded toward the shaft with the eagerness of animals after food, sloshing and splashing in the turgid water underfoot. Jerry Stevens

could sense their rapacious hunger. Ah, Cardoni kept them half-starved, indeed! Instinctively he followed the rush along the black tunnel.

On the bottom platform of the cage was a huge, steaming kettle; above, on the upper platform, loomed the black figure of Cardoni. High overhead was the square-cut bit of sky, blue, desert sky, serene and cheerful. But against it a raised arm and an automatic revolver was silhouetted ominously.

The booming voice of Cardoni sounded.

"An addition to the ranks of labor!" he announced gleefully. "All acquainted down there yet?"

No answer; the men below were lifting the great kettle from the platform, sniffing it eagerly. "Corn meal again," one of them grunted.

"Well," Cardoni continued, "it's an extra ton to-day! And, Stevens, listen: one bit of foolishness and you're a dead one! Understand that! Ask the others what they got for trying to get out. Next time it's death, and they know it. As for you, they're working too well to let one man disturb them. Just one false move and surer than all hell, Stevens, you're a dead man!"

The cage shook, jerked upward; the blue square of sky was blotted out. Above sounded the satisfied chuckle of Henry Cardoni; below, eight men and a girl, slaves of blackness and hunger, were rushing a kettle of corn meal mush toward their little cave and the tin plates it contained. And Jerry Stevens joined that strange stampede. Food suddenly seemed almost as all-important to him as to the others. Already he vaguely understood their lethargic despair, their descent to the animal level where food and sleep and work and pain was all life offered them.

A TIN plate was pushed into the hands of Jerry Stevens, and he waited expectantly over the steaming kettle. It was customary, he learned, to let the girl, Jacquith Bur-

rell, have her dish first, then the men divided what was left.

That morning there was an unusual supply of the mush. Dad Burrell exclaimed over it. "The devil is feeling good this morning! Most food in a week! We've got you to thank, Mr. —"

"Stevens, Jerry Stevens."

"We've got you to thank for that, Jerry. Another laborer puts him in good humor. Well, let's go!"

There was a clank of tin dishes against the iron kettle, followed by animal-like sounds of licking and swallowing. The technique of eating, Stevens learned, was to use fingers and tongue; there were no utensils of any kind.

Many other things of that black, underground world he learned in the next few minutes. The men in it were mostly known to him by name and reputation. All, with the exception of Dad Burrell, were young engineers in their late twenties or early thirties; all were normally courageous and resourceful; yet all of them had apparently accepted their present position as hopeless, with death the probable outlet.

That conviction of hopelessness brought Jerry Stevens up with a jerk. Those fellows, he realized, had been through the torturing grind for days; they had used their brains and their strength desperately to discover a way out.

But they had failed. Probably he, too, so high now in hope of escape, would ultimately bump into that blank wall of failure.

"By God! I won't!" Unconsciously Jerry muttered the words aloud, so intense was his determination.

"What's that?" demanded Dad Burrell.

Jerry was silent.

"Well, it's work then!" Dad Burrell ordered. "The sooner we get at it the better. Nine tons to-day, damn him! And you, Jerry, you won't be much help at first. It takes time to get the

feel of things in the darkness; maybe you ought just to carry to-day while the rest of us do the underhand stoping."

"Carry?" repeated Jerry Stevens. "You mean—"

"I mean the mines of China, the worst mines in Mexico, aren't as primitive as this one. The vein is angling down, pinching out. We peck at it with hand drills and sledges; pry off bits. Mostly quartz, but now and then, thank heaven, some decomposed granite. Then we carry it on our backs to the shaft. Sometimes we load it, sometimes Toby does. But nine tons to-day! Come on, men! We daren't fall down; we're too weak now to stand much more of the starvation punishment."

With groans and protests the men climbed to their feet and pushed down the tunnel. One at a time they dropped out of line and were swallowed up in the blackness.

"WE work far apart," Dad Burrell explained to Jerry, "for fear we'll hit each other with a sledge. It isn't so necessary now; we can see each other quite well. Yes, we're developing cat's eyes. You, now, I'll bet it's as black as ink to you, eh?"

"Blacker," Stevens confessed. "Ouch! What's that, a mineral pillar?"

"No. Cardoni's too greedy to leave any pillars of his precious ore. A little stull timbering, that's all. You'll find all the timbers in a short time; only seven uprights. We're working broadside now. Here's my place, Jerry. You explore the tunnel, learn its twists and timbers, and then start up and down behind us and pick up the stuff we chip loose.

"Let us know when you come near, though, so you won't get hit in the head like Jacquith did."

"Did Miss Jacquith—" began Jerry Stevens, but his words were

drowned in a sudden din which echoed and vibrated deafeningly through the tunnel. The slaves of Cardoni had started their hopeless work.

Hammer clanged against drill, drill bit into rock, men pried and grunted, mineral crashed to the floor or splashed soddenly in the little pools.

Stevens wanted to put his hands over his ears and cover his face; he leaned against a dripping wall, half dazed by it all. Thoughts and visions trickled through his mind: Unhealthy gnomes, red-eyed creatures of the underworld working like fiends for a small portion of mush over which they guzzled and licked their lips; futile little men, weak and white, coughing and complaining helplessly, while over them ruled a giant, an insane ogre. He shuddered and the feeling of hopelessness which permeated the place flowed through him.

Some one brushed past him. The girl, Jacquith Burrell. He reached out a hand, touched her arm. His spirit demanded that he find something of reality, something of beauty and life in this cavern of the dead.

"Who is it, please? Oh, Jerry?" The girl's voice was a low, husky contralto, muted and yet as clearly beautiful as a 'cello. She called the newcomer by name quite naturally. "Jerry? Oh, yes!"

Jerry felt a little hand slide gently down his arm, into his own hand. It remained there just long enough to give a faint pressure, then the girl hurried on.

He stared after her, unseeing in the blackness. Ah, she knew! She sensed his sudden feeling of loss, of blindness, there in the Stygian cave; she had paused to touch his hand, to cheer him.

Resolutely Jerry Stevens turned to the task ahead of him, picking up the loosened ore and carrying it in canvas sacks to the foot of the shaft and emptying it on a pile there. If the girl

could maintain her courage, surely he could. And hours later, when the agony of strained muscles and aching back almost paralyzed him, he thought again of the girl who walked among the men, encouraging them, helping them, herself carrying ore or prying on a drill, and he staggered ahead through the black tunnel which always seemed longer, and through black hours which were like weeks and years.

TWELVE hours of back-breaking work, and yet Jerry Stevens could not sleep. Utter weariness seemed to keep him awake, and twinges of agony throughout his body made him twitch fitfully. His mind, too, was feverishly active; it would not be lulled into quiescence. He knew and shared the horrible fear which obsessed the slaves; he knew now that it was not for themselves they worried most, but for little "Jaky" Burrell.

He had learned the story from Paul Harvey during one of the black hours which followed the greedy gulping of stew which Cardoni sent down for supper. There had been no lunch, no rest period at noon; just incessant toil. The thick stew, when it came, was not fit for human beings, but the mine workers literally licked the kettle clean and then drank great quantities of the brackish water which seeped through the mine to wash the taste from their mouths.

Jerry Stevens had no appetite for the food; his body revolted. Like a maimed animal, he had crawled into the farthest corner. Jacquith Burrell came to him, and for a few moments her cool hand rested on his burning forehead. Neither talked.

The girl, he realized, for all her beautiful youth, was mothering the eight men, consoling them, cheering them.

It was she who gave them the courage to continue the deadly struggle against hunger and inhuman labor and Cardoni's fiendish cruelties. Quite def-

initely she had become an angel to the toilers, an angel of light in a region of utter blackness.

"Cardoni wants her," Paul Harvey whispered hoarsely as he squatted down beside Jerry Stevens when the girl had left to join her father. His words were heavy with fear and revulsion. "He has offered her her freedom, to live in his house on his conditions. He put her down here to break her spirit, and now he is beginning to insist that she go up there. He has a woman living there already, maybe two. I saw them, Tita and a strange wisp of a girl. But Jaky won't go! By God, she won't! Not as long as one of us is alive! You understand that, Jerry? You know—" he choked, coughed painfully, and then his words blurted out: "You know we have taken a sort of blood oath on it. Cardoni doesn't get her as long as one of us is alive! And that's one reason we fight to keep alive. Yesterday the devil sent Toby after her. We ranged around her with our sledges. We'd have killed Toby, and we knew that Cardoni was standing there ready to shoot up down for it. And he saw it. He didn't want to lose his laborers—not just yet. So he called Toby off. But some time—some time—"

Harvey's words trailed off into silence; a moment later a paroxysm of coughing doubled him up, and he threw himself back on the floor, seeking that rest and sleep which wouldn't come to Jerry Stevens.

Men were already breathing with the heavy regularity of sleep in that black cavern. Occasionally one of them groaned and tossed in his dreams, a half-nourished body protesting against hunger and lack of sunlight and the long, long punishment of labor. Every hour, with almost clock-like regularity, Paul Harvey coughed as if his chest must burst. The black-eyed little Spanish engineer was muttering over and over again, "*Sea como Dios quiera*"—"God's will be done." Once

he awakened enough to sob, "A cigarette! *Madre mia*, a cigarette!"

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE BOTTOM OF THE PIT.

AT last Jerry could endure it no longer. Cautiously he raised his aching body and crawled across the sprawled, fatigue-sodden figures of his comrades. He reached the tunnel without disturbing any one, and there he pushed himself to his blistered feet. Along the drift he felt his way with his hands until a breath of fresher air told him he was nearing the shaft. He found a precious match in his pocket and struck it.

Momentarily he was blinded. Odd, he thought numbly, how his eyes already were so sensitized to light that even a match's flare was painful. He could imagine the agony the others had endured when he had lighted his first match in the mine, and when Toby came among them with his little miner's lamp, small wonder it was torture to them.

Cupping the match in his palms to shield his eyes, he studied the shaft. Merely upright planks, they were, nailed tightly together and braced every twelve or fifteen feet with cross-pieces. No ladder, no way of egress except to climb up those sheer walls; and if, by some superhuman endeavor, a man should reach the top, what then? The heavy cage blocked the opening; he would remain penned in just as Paul Harvey had been during his futile effort to escape.

For a moment Jerry Stevens felt a desire to touch a match to the planking, fire the whole shaft. But what would be gained? Suffocation, perhaps, for those below; starvation, certainly. No, there was no hope in that scheme.

The match burned short in his fingers. He relinquished it regretfully and struck another. Below him was the cage pit into which he had fallen

that morning. Water dripped into it and oozed slowly out again; in a dozen pools the match flame was reflected, reminding him of Cardoni's eyes—many yellow eyes staring up at him.

"By Judas!" exclaimed Stevens suddenly, and was startled by the hollow echo of his own words. "That's the only possible answer!" Hope surged through him again, and an immense desire to clamber down into the pit and investigate more closely.

That seemingly simple maneuver was not easily accomplished. Eventually he twisted his shirt into a short rag rope and fastened one end of it to a shackle bolt which was used to anchor the cage when it was being loaded with ore. The other end dangled a couple of feet down into the eight-foot pit, and by it Stevens lowered himself, sure of a means of climbing out.

Once down in the little black cubicle he struck another match, leaning close to the floor to study the action of the water. He found that it was trickling out a small fissure in the far corner. The discovery filled him with a totally unreasonable delight. Probably, he decided instantly, the water flowed into Duckfoot Cañon; perhaps it oozed out the side wall. It might even be the very stream which had made the discovery of the mine possible by staining the rock walls with oxide.

And if water oozed out that way, was it not possible for human beings, by digging and tunneling, to follow it? He didn't stop to consider the yards of hard rock which might bar the way, nor the ceaseless vigilance of Cardoni and Toby; he visualized instead the mine gallows and how it appeared to stand on the very edge of the cañon.

HE longed to awaken his comrades, to tell them of his discovery and his hopes. Back in the cavern where they slept, he struck a match, words ready to burst from him. But one sight of the sodden heaps of hu-

manity checked him. Sprawled in grotesque piles, their heads cushioned on their arms or on their shoes, their blue-white faces horrible masks of weariness and suffering, they were too pitiable to awaken to the realities of life. For a long moment Stevens studied the rag-wrapped bundles; Paul Harvey, hollow-eyed and emaciated; the little Spaniard with his eternally muttered prayer; big Buck Davis, one arm bandaged in a foul, red-stained rag; Slim Buckingham, with the body of a scarecrow and the face of a madonna; a little blond fellow, a mere boy, who had been named the Kid; a slight, nervous man called "Blackie" who suffered as intensely as an addict deprived of drug, and finally of old Dad Burrell and Jacquith.

The girl was sleeping in the corner, her little body curled like a cat's, one hand nestling under her chin, the other clutching her father, who slept beside her. The match light danced in her hair and shadows played wistfully across her face. Even in sleep her lips were parted in a half smile, mingled cheer and defiance.

Under her eyes, Jerry Stevens noted, were blue circles, and her hands and arms were unnaturally thin. Through his mind flashed a conviction that the girl, given first chance at all food, actually took just enough to keep herself alive. It would be like her, of course, the fine brave kid! Jerry felt a lump in his throat and swore at it. Cardoni would not get his eyes on her!

Some one stirred and muttered, and Jerry extinguished the match quickly. He crawled back to his place in that jack-straw mess of humanity. Hope and determination were strong within him; together they finally buoyed him up into the realms of sleep.

THE roar and shock of the cage descending in the shaft roused Jerry from a trancelike sleep. The other mine-dwellers were already awake and he heard them pound down

the tunnel like wolves seeking the morning kill. Back they came with the steaming kettle.

"Cornmeal mush!" shrilled Blackie, almost hysterically. "And heavier'n usual. Guess he must be pleased, eh?"

Jerry noticed that the dwellers of blackness almost always referred to Cardoni as "he"; occasionally one of them spoke of "that devil" but rarely was his name mentioned. It was as if the slave-driver were not a human being, but rather, a fearful giant hated by pygmies.

"Come on, Jaky!" rasped Paul Harvey. "And where's Jerry? He's got to have his share: no supper last night."

Jerry found himself dipping his tin plate eagerly into the gruel, found himself guzzling and licking like the rest, and relishing it. It was warming, it was nourishing, it filled that aching void within him; in short, it was food, and only those who are starved know what food really is.

When the last drop of the mush had been gulped down Jerry moved close to old Dad Burrell and told him briefly of his night's explorations.

"That must be the way out," he concluded enthusiastically. "We can tunnel through to the cañon wall!"

"Think so?" demanded Dad Burrell. His voice was leaden, he seemed quite disinterested. "Well, we aren't such fools that we didn't consider that a long time ago. But we gave up the idea. Too damn hopeless. Probably we'd have to dig a hundred feet, and with Toby and Cardoni watching us most of the time, too. And by the time we got halfway out that way this gold-bearing vein will have petered out. Then Cardoni will either release us or leave us to die of starvation. Nope, Jerry, your big idea is no good."

"But it might be, Dad!" It was Jacquith. Her voice was low but intense. "It might be! Don't let's miss a chance!"

"No good," repeated her father. "How could any one dig with that yellow-eyed devil standing on the cage right above and Toby constantly checking up on us?"

"At night, then?" suggested Jerry.

"Fine chance! The sound of the drill and sledge would reach him in his house. Down he'd come; we'd get hell and starvation and you'd be beaten to death or shot."

"Moments like now, then," Jerry insisted, refusing to give up. "Every day we could get in an hour or two of work. Perhaps it's not far we'd have to tunnel. I don't think it is. As I remember, the workings are on the very edge of the cañon."

Dad Burrell shrugged his shoulders. "One chance in a thousand," he declared. "But if you want to take the risk the men will be willing to do your share of the mining while you tunnel. Only I advise against it, my boy. It's worse than foolhardy. You're playing with death. Let him find out what you're trying to do and he'd make an example of you. Kill you in cold blood and leave your body down here as a constant reminder for us. That's just what he'd do, surer than fate!"

"I'll risk it," Jerry declared shortly. A hand touched his in the darkness—Jaky's hand. From it flowed an odd, intangible strength and inspiration. "And by God, I'll get through, too!" he blurted, whirling and striding away toward the pit.

In the tunnel he paused to pick up a sledge and a drill.

Again he used his shirt rope to descend into the cage pit. Once down, he attacked his problem. His first move was to soak his gray coat in the red-black water, rub it into the dirt. That would serve as a curtain, a screen in front of the tunnel he hoped to dig. A moment later he had begun his task, prying and pecking at the aperture through which the water oozed away. Hope and determination doubled his strength; he fancied his prog-

ress was more rapid than it really was. Behind him in the tunnel had begun the clank and pounding of the other subterranean toilers, concealing his efforts with their noise.

JUST fifteen minutes Jerry snatched for his work that morning, but he felt he had a start, the first break in the hard quartz. Then the cage started to descend and he piled out of the pit barely in time to escape being crushed.

The cage jerked to a stop and Toby stepped from the bottom platform. His lamp gleamed like a vicious yellow eye as he slithered past Jerry, who pretended to be dumping ore, and on down the tunnel. Laboriously he counted the slaves, who closed their eyes tightly and ceased work when he approached. A moment later he returned and grunted incoherent words to Cardoni who was perched on the upper platform.

"Good!" boomed the other. "Load!"

Toby leaped suddenly at Jerry, caught him by the shoulders and swung him roughly to the pile of ore which was beside the shaft, at the same time thrusting a shovel into his hand. He understood that he was to help load the cage, and he worked rapidly, willingly, for he hoped to impress Toby with his obedience. In a few minutes the loaded cage jerked upward, Toby astride the ore.

Jerry dropped instantly back into the pit, over-zealous in his determination to make every moment count. The move was unfortunate. The cage descended again with unexpected suddenness. Jerry jumped to the pit edge, tried to swing himself out with his little rope. He was a second late. The cage was about to crush him, pin him down, half his body over the edge. Instinctively he squirmed back and fell into the pit again. The cage, missing him by inches, jerked to a stop overhead.

Penned down there in the blackness,

Jerry waited. His heart pounded, his thoughts raced. If the cage was lowered to let Cardoni climb off, then he was certain to be crushed against the rock floor of the pit. Just a notion of the master to visit his peons at work, and the fate of one of those peons was sealed forever. Or if Toby made another count, another inspection, his absence would be noted. Then would follow a search, detection, and the quick death which old Dad Burrell had suggested was awaiting him.

Jerry sprawled on the pit floor, hoping that the cage, when it descended farther, might clear him. He knew it was a false hope; the pit was only deep enough to let the cage rest on rock when the top platform was even with the drift. Yes, a false hope, but he clung to its desperately.

Water eddied around him, soaked his meager clothing; he was chilled, shivering with expectancy and fear. Like Damocles waiting for the suspended sword to descend across his neck, Jerry Stevens waited for the crushing cage to settle on him. He could feel his heart thumping like a mighty drum through every artery of his rigid body.

Age-long minutes passed. Toby shifted noisily in the bottom of the cage. Why didn't he step off and let Cardoni lower the cage into the pit? Why not get it over with? This long wait for death was too agonizing to be endured. A shout welled up in Jerry's throat; it took effort of will to check it.

Let them find him! Let them haul him out, beat him, kill him; anything was better than watching for slow death to claim him.

Suddenly a voice sounded above. It was Cardoni calling to Toby through the floor of his platform. His voice was muffled, far too low to be heard by the toilers in the tunnel.

"Watching, Toby? You savvy, eh? When she comes near, grab her quick and up we go!"

Toby grunted his answer. "She no come yet."

IN his black dungeon Jerry Stevens straightened. His fists clenched. That was it! Those two fiends up there were waiting to steal little Jacquith Burrell.

Thought of his own danger left Jerry in a flash of consuming rage and hatred. He longed to tear the cage to pieces, to reach for Cardoni's throat and claw it. He cursed his own impotence, he cursed the black cave which confined him so helplessly, cursed most of all Cardoni and his black heart.

To warn the girl, to save her! With all the power of a white-hot mind Jerry Stevens willed that Jacquith should not approach the shaft. He wondered if willing did any good and while wondering, continued to will. Once he thought he heard her coming near and a cry of warning rose to his lips. Then her voice died away again and relief surged through him. But if she did approach again he would certainly betray himself to save her.

The dread, strained waiting continued for minutes which seemed hours, for an hour which was as long as a day; a game of cat-and-mouse with human lives at stake.

Again Cardoni called to Toby. "All right! We're going up for lunch. Toby. Plenty of time later."

The cage bumped upward. Jerry Stevens followed it instantly, leaping to the pit edge and raising himself over it. In the tunnel sounded many racing footsteps. A cry sounded.

"Jerry! Oh, Jerry! Are you alive?" It was Jacquith's voice and her heart was in it.

"All right!" called Jerry, stumbling forward.

Their two bodies collided violently in the tunnel blackness: instinctively their arms went around each other for support and they clung tightly.

"Oh, I thought you had been crushed when you didn't come out!"

the girl cried. "I thought they had discovered you. I thought—my last hope—my bravest man—my—" Her words trailed off into silence and Jerry realized she was sobbing on his shoulder, the first time she had allowed weakness to claim her.

"It's all right, Jaky," Jerry soothed. "But keep away from the shaft!" He whirled on the others who had pressed close in the darkness. "Understand!" he declared fiercely. "Keep Jacquith away from the shaft! I overheard Cardoni—he was waiting for her, he and Toby, ready to steal her. They don't want a fight, but they're coming down again to try to take her!"

Through that black tunnel a low growl sounded, menacing, animal-like, heavy with the threat of an aroused wolf pack. Steal Jacquith? Not this side of the doors of death.

CHAPTER VII.

DIGGING LIKE A MOLE.

MATCHES!

They were more precious than gold, as precious as food, almost as precious as breath itself.

For eight days Jerry Stevens had limited himself to one each day, lighted cautiously when he had to leave his secret tunnel work. In its glare, which daily hurt his eyes more, he studied the progress he was making, planned for the next day's work. When he first descended into the tunnel he had possessed perhaps two dozen matches. Some had been lost, others were water-soaked. Now, on the eighth day, he had but two left him.

Such eight days! Nightmare days. Blackness and toil until the body refused to obey longer, then sleep, only to awaken into more blackness and toil. Hollow echoes and chill air; splashing water, lacerated hands, bodies twitching with agony and fatigue; revolting food which was consumed to keep the spark of life burning. And over it

all like a black cloud of doom loomed the threat of Cardoni.

Jerry concentrated on his tunnel, spending every unwatched moment pecking away at it. He felt safer since Cardoni no longer descended to the main level; his work went faster. It was not much more than a worm hole which wound and twisted to avoid the hardest granite, barely large enough to squeeze through and completely hidden at its opening by his coat, yet it extended almost thirty feet toward the cañon.

How much farther he had to dig he had no idea; daily he hoped some air draft, some outside sound would give him a clew. Meanwhile he worked with never flagging determination, following the course of the oozing water. The débris he carried to the far end of the main tunnel where thus far it had escaped Toby's attention.

One thing surprised and worried him—the attitude of his fellows. Instead of encouraging him, offering to help, they grew daily more distant. It seemed as if they envied him his one great interest in that realm of hopelessness, were jealous of the star which illumined the black horizon for him. Undoubtedly they thought he was doomed to failure, begrudged the extra labor which fell to them while he pecked at his tunnel. And they were jealous of the aid, the interest, the encouragement Jacquith gave Jerry. Even Dad Burrell shared that feeling. Forgotten was the fact that Jerry was laboring tremendously to save them and the girl as well as himself; predominant in their warped, lightless minds was the fact that his efforts set him apart in the girl's eyes, brought him additional attention.

Their little black world was too small. Petty envies and jealousies were pressed in upon them by the dripping walls, down upon them by the black ceiling. There was no outlet, no escape. And before long those veiled sarcasms and gibes would become open

hatred. Then, probably, his work toward liberation would stop perforce.

THE ninth day the tension increased. Jerry was deep in his tunnel when the customary kettle of cornmeal mush was lowered. Returning to the cavern room a few minutes later, he found no breakfast had been saved for him.

"Only the workers should eat," grunted the little Spanish engineer venomously. "That's what 'he' says."

Jerry, his whole body crying for sustenance, was silent, but a protest was wrung from Jacquith. "What do you mean? Oh, isn't there any left for Jerry?"

Her perturbation, her defense of the lone worker, didn't help the situation and Jerry returned to his tunnel feeling that a volcano of mean emotions was about to tear their little realm of blackness asunder.

He worked harder than ever that day, alternating between the ore body and his pitiful little tunnel as the cage lowered or ascended. Without mercy he drove his weakened body and aching muscles.

"I must be almost through, I must be almost through."

The words became a refrain in his heated brain; with them came the conviction that he was right. One day, two days, a week, perhaps, and he would suddenly pierce into the outside world.

And what was a day more or less in that infernal region? Just another round of agonizing toil, cramped and confined in a little tunnel; that was all.

He reached his goal sooner than he expected. That night, wearied beyond measure, he lighted one of the two remaining matches and held it in front of his prone body. For two days he had been working through decomposed granite, and in front of him was more of the everlasting stuff, a wall of it. Sight of it, so blank, so hopeless, made

self-pity choke in his throat. Then he noticed his match.

The flame and slight haze of smoke which ordinarily rose straight in the still air, was borne rapidly away from him. The match flickered out. A draft! From inside the mine to the outside! Its meaning was obvious.

"Almost through, almost through!"

The words were not spoken aloud, but they seemed to echo deafeningly in Jerry's ears. He threw caution aside. Viciously he jabbed at the crumbling granite. He pounded with his sledge, prodded with a sharp crowbar. Back he drew, then hunched his whole body forward, charging as with a lance. The shock hurt him from head to heels. The point of the bar stopped, then suddenly plunged forward again. It almost slipped out of his hands, so far it went. He clung to it, withdrew it. A whistling of released air sounded, and then, clearly as pebbles dropped into a well, he heard the trickle of rubble down a cañon wall.

The outside world! The world of sunlight and fresh air, of flowers and the meadowlark's song, of clean food and clean, wholesome people, of laughter and joy and love—it was just beyond that little crumbling wall of granite—just beyond.

For a long moment Jerry Stevens remained motionless in his little tunnel, too happy to move, almost too happy to think. This was his moment of triumph. No matter if Cardoni discovered him now, no matter if they were all recaptured and put back into the mine, he alone, Jerry Stevens, had pierced the wall which separated hell from earth.

At last he wormed his way back to the pit, climbed up to the tunnel, and strode along it to the cavern room. His head was back, his stride had lengthened unconsciously into that of a conqueror.

He told no one that night. First he must find where his outlet led, whether ropes must be woven to descend the

cañon wall; he must decide, too, the proper time and plan for the attempted escape.

Only to Jacquith, who had saved him a plate of the stenchful stew, he whispered, as his hand closed over hers, the single word: "Victory!"

CHAPTER VIII.

FREEDOM.

OF all the age-long days in that pit of blackness, the next one was the longest to Jerry Stevens. The nearness of freedom, combined with the fear that Cardoni or Toby might discover the little tunnel at the last heart-rending moment, made the minutes drag endlessly. At every opportunity he crawled into the passage he had dug, as if to assure himself it still existed.

He widened it, pecked out the decomposed granite ahead of him until a mere shell remained. Through the hole his crowbar had made he studied the location of the outlet. That in itself was a long task; first he must accustom his eyes to daylight again, cover and uncover them alternately to overcome the sun-blindness, to assuage the stabbing pain.

And finally he saw.

Not more than eight feet below him was the switchback road. Luck, at last! Just burst through that final shell of rock and drop out into the glorious world again—that was all that remained of those eternal days of toil.

The supper hour and the sickening stew at last; the guzzling and licking of lips; the grunts and the beginning of those constantly increasing snarls; Jacquith crowding close to him, eager questions on her lips; angry gibes from the little Spanish engineer, the nerve-racking cough of Paul Harvey—Judas, how it all dragged!

Suddenly Jerry leaped to his feet. He sailed his tin plate across the black cavern. It clanked metallically against

the stone wall and dropped to the floor. He shouted. In the darkness he could sense the other men withdrawing fearfully from him. Themselves close to insanity, they believed him mad.

"All right, men!" he called wildly. "We're going out! We're through with this hell hole! We're through forever!"

Again he could sense that withdrawing of his companions, feel the frightened breathlessness of the place. "No, no!" he pleaded earnestly. "I'm not crazy. I've pecked my way through! The tunnel has reached the world!"

A moment of dazed silence, then questions began to pop. It took many minutes to convince the cavern dwellers that they were at the doorway of life again. Belief, when it came, burst over them like a breaking wave. There followed a mad rush for the tunnel, but Jerry was ahead of them, blocking the way.

"No, no!" he ordered. "We must go quietly, in single file, with some plan in mind. Listen! I'll lead the way, because I know the tunnel. Jacquith will follow me; then Dad. The rest of you can draw lots. No, I'll call your order.

"Remember now: Harve, Blackie, Buck Davis, the Kid, Slim, and Chico—that's the order. And don't crowd too closely in the tunnel. We'll all get out. Sure we will. But I must have room to knock down the last bit of wall and a moment to work. Remember, the opening is eight feet above the switchback road; you'll have to drop to it. And when you get down, wait for the rest. Don't start out over the desert alone. The light, to-morrow, will blind you. My eyes are better. Stick together, and I'll lead you."

"The light, to-morrow!" echoed the little blond fellow, the Kid, and he began to sob convulsively. Other nerves, too, taut far too long, were ready to snap in the darkness. Jerry sensed it, saw the need for the palliative of immediate action.

"Come on!" he called. "We're going out!"

"Going out!" came the response, oft-repeated and low, like the sighing of wind through trees. "Going out!"

DOWN the passage scurried the little band, Jerry in the lead and clinging to the hand of Jacquith. He dropped into the cage pit and caught the girl, who leaped down into his arms. Behind crowded the others with the panicky haste of rats leaving a burning ship.

Then the crawl through the tunnel, one man's head against his leader's heels, ignoring Jerry's plea for order and slower movement, and already the flight to freedom had become a veritable stampede.

Fortunately the thin shell of granite crumbled readily before Jerry's blows. He was out into the world now, letting himself over the ledge. Again he reached up to catch Jacquith. A little gasp, and she stood beside him on the ribbonlike road, while overhead, like bees from a hive, the mine dwellers popped out of the hole in the wall. Without thought of hurt, they leaped downward, falling on top of each other in their haste. Breathing was noisy and rapid there in the desert night, and hearts pounded with a strange mixture of exaltation and doubt.

All were out at last, out of that black hell-hole of agony. But their reaction was unforeseen by Jerry. Chico, the Spaniard, moved first, sidling slowly down the road toward the desert. The Kid followed him. Chico moved faster, broke into a run. The Kid leaped up even with him. Then the others joined the stampede. They pounded down the road at top speed, and the sound of their frantic steps echoed back. Even now, it seemed, they scarcely believed in their new-found freedom; the only way they could believe was to leave their black cavern farther and farther behind.

"Damn!" muttered Jerry. "Can't stop them! And if Cardoni hears them there'll be trouble yet. He'll try to round them up, even shoot them down, rather than have them carry the tale of his peonage— Hello, who's there?"

"Why, I'm here, of course." It was Jacquith Burrell's voice. "Hadn't we better run with them?" Her question was quiet, trustful.

"No. We'll wait here a few minutes. Maybe if Cardoni starts after them we can stop him here. I have the crowbar for a weapon. Shh! Hear some one coming?"

They waited, the man and girl, pressed against the cañon wall. In their breathlessness they imagined they heard some one approaching from above. Jerry gripped the iron bar fiercely; he'd not regret the necessity of wielding it on Cardoni's black head.

From below sounded the continual pounding of feet, the scuff of gravel, the occasional clang of heel on stone, but there was no sound from the road above.

"Seems as if they must have heard that gang!" Jerry declared. "Funny Toby and Cardoni aren't running down to catch them." He waited a few moments more, then, "I'm going up," he announced.

"No, no! Don't!" Jacquith pleaded. "Let's run with the others!"

But when Jerry swung silently up the road she stayed by his side.

It was only a short climb to the mine house, around a single curve. There it was, squatting large and black just ahead of them, its windows shining out into the night like square white eyes. But there was no sign of motion around it, no sound.

"I wonder!" mused Jerry, sliding closer.

"What?" breathed the girl.

"The basement! Maybe that's why they didn't hear. Maybe they're down there. Maybe it's the night he and Toby—"

He stopped suddenly, studying a thin line of light just above the foundation. Yes, it came from the cellar.

MORE confidently now he moved forward. A moment later he had his face pressed to the crack from which the ribbon of light issued. He drew back blinking. Again he must accustom his eyes to brightness. The girl at his side was imitating his action. In a moment Jerry could see, but Jacquith was still blinking and squinting.

Yes, they were down there, Cardoni and Toby, just as Jerry had seen them that night ages ago, when he was Cardoni's guest. The light on the dirt pile, the gigantic white man, his bare body gleaming with perspiration, his fists beating off the big, brown, maimed Piute, the weirdly dancing shadows on the far wall—all just as Jerry had witnessed it before. And once more Cardoni's fists were beating Toby mercilessly, systematically closing his one good eye. God! The heartless fiend.

A scream at his side made Jerry's heart leap and then sink sickeningly. It was Jacquith. She had seen at last, and the horror of the sight had wrung a blood-curdling cry from her. She strove to check it, too late.

Jerry remained for a brief moment with his eye glued to the crack, powerless to move. Down below him he saw Cardoni, his face contorted with surprise and sudden fear, turn toward the cry. Then Jerry saw more—a terribly dramatic climax to the final act.

Jacquith's cry had startled Cardoni, thrown him off his guard; his head was turned, his arms half lowered to his sides. That was Toby's moment, the moment for which he had endured untold hours of hellish torture. He leaped in; his gorillalike arms swung in brown arcs; a fist crashed on Cardoni's jaw.

The white giant staggered back, weakly trying to raise his hands. Another blow from the left swung him

half around and forward, to fall into a third pistonlike jab which snapped his head back on his shoulders. For a tenth-second he wavered, then slumped to the floor. Toby was on him instantly, straddling the great body with his knees, beating, beating him with his great brown fists.

Jerry could watch no more. Momentarily he shut his eyes. When he opened them again Toby had risen. He touched the warped figure of Cardoni contemptuously with his foot, then leaped across it and picked up the gasoline lamp, much as Cardoni had done those many times when he had left Toby on the floor. But the Piute did not take the lamp with him. At the top of the cellar stairs he whirled like a madman and threw the lamp down on that white body of his erstwhile master, leaping back as he threw.

A VIOLENT explosion shook the mountain mansion of Henry Cardoni and all its surroundings; windows crashed, timbers cracked, the air roared deafeningly. Then there was silence for a brief moment, a strange vacuum of sound and life and air.

Jerry Stevens and Jacquith picked themselves from the ground where the explosion had thrown them. For a breath they were dazed, uncomprehending. Then, "Fire!" cried Jerry. "Look!"

The desert-dried house of Henry Cardoni was bursting into flames like resinous tinder. The 'dobe walls made a veritable furnace of it, the cellar furnished the draft. With a single wild sweep the tongues of fire licked upward, ravenously, explosively, gleefully, sucking *la casa grande* into its red maw.

Jacquith began to sob suddenly. Her head was buried in the crook of her right arm and she backed rapidly from the blinding blaze. "Jerry, Jerry!" she choked, feeling for him blindly with one hand. "Come! Quick!"

Consolingly Jerry put his arm across the girl's shoulders, led her toward the road. Suddenly he stopped. "The tractor train!" he cried. "We'll need it to get across the desert and to pick up all the others. This way!"

The two turned toward the mine shaft where the fire gleamed dully on a great pile of black ore, the ore they had helped wrench from the reluctant earth, and where the skeletonlike gallows stood guard over the tractor train.

Beside the little shaft house the man and girl waited a moment, spellbound by the spectacular pillaring of the flames. "Cardoni's pyre!" muttered Jerry. Then: "Look!"

Beyond the burning mansion, through the little huts which were doomed, too, to feed the greedy fire, three figures flitted. Ahead of them raced their shadows, climbing the mountains toward the distant peaks. Rapidly the shadows ascended, dancing as they climbed; behind, the human figures moved more slowly, but more surely up the steep slope.

"Toby!" exclaimed Jerry. "Toby in his triumph! He has beaten the master. The elfin girl—whoever she is—she is his now, and poor Tita, too! He has won! They all have won! Cardoni is—"

His words trailed into silence. The wonder of it all overcame him. The majestic fire which colored the desert below into a vividly great orange sea; the mountains, looming so huge and impassive above the billowing clouds of smoke, the roar and fiendish laughter of the flames, leaping higher, ever higher. Those three shadowy figures, too, fleeing toward the distant peaks. Up there on the highest probably dwelt some Indian god of legend; to him they were taking their new-found freedom, new-found happiness, Toby and Tita and the elfin Indian girl.

With a reverberating crash the roof

of Cardoni's mansion dropped into the blazing, walled furnace. Sparks and embers leaped skyward as if to mingle with the stars. And below, down there in the cellar was—

Jerry checked his thoughts. "Come, Jacquith!" he called softly, lifting her into the first wagon of the train. "We're going out of hell, and into our world again!"

JOE JADIZ stared sleepily out of the window of his loft. Below him sounded the sputter of a powerful motor.

"Toby's tractor train," he muttered. Then his black eyes narrowed. "*Car-ramba!* People in it! Looks like a funny bridal procession, eh? Piutes? But, no! That little blond fellow driving it; a red-haired fellow in the first wagon with his arm around his girl and—"

Suddenly the voice of Joe Jadiz shut off breathlessly. He had recognized some of the passengers of the strange train. "*Cuerpo de Dios!*" he shrilled, leaping toward the ladder.

Thus it was that while the caravan of former mine dwellers rode into Cactus Siding from one direction, Joe Jadiz spurred his beloved Juanita out the other, thankful that the Nevada State line was not far away.

But the passengers of the dragon train were not concerned with revenge. Too happy they were, too gloriously happy in what to them was the greatest gift of all: freedom. Perhaps there were other emotions in the minds of some of them; certainly it was not joy alone which flooded the eyes of Jacquith Burrell and Jerry Stevens as they gazed at each other. Wonder and gentleness, trust and—

"Jerry, Jerry!" murmured the girl, and her hands clung more tightly to his. "I'm so happy—I'm—I'm just going to enjoy a good, hard cry on your shoulder!"



He sat there in the Nicaraguan jungle and turned the slipper over in his hand

The Blood of Morgan

Lost in the tropical jungle, and trailed by bandit spies, Eddie Brooks stumbles deeper into the tangled web of Nicaraguan intrigue

By LIEUT. JOHN HOPPER

Author of "Texas Comes to West Point," "The Fighting Irish," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

EDWARD BROOKS, on furlough from West Point, is riding to the New York dock to take ship for Panama and his father's army post. He is accompanied by his roommate, Garrison Crowell. Near the dock they see a limousine stopped in the middle of the street, with the chauffeur slumped over the wheel. Investigating, they find the chauffeur stabbed with a jeweled dagger, an elderly man knocked out with a blow on the head, and a girl who is just regaining consciousness.

The whistle of Eddie's boat blows; and she begs them not to call the police,

for she must catch that boat, even without her uncle. Eddie leaves her with Garry—but she slips away, holding onto the taxi, and makes the boat. Meeting on shipboard, she assures him Garry is all right. They discover that her stateroom has been ransacked; and she intrusts him with a satin slipper, begging him to keep it hidden.

One night a Central American halts Eddie with a knife, and demands the "Blood of Morgan," which he says the girl—Margarita—gave him. Eddie denies it—and just then the man is struck down by an unseen assailant. A jeweled dagger is found in the body!

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for February 23.

Eddie discovers that his cabin has been ransacked, too—and after the murder! There are other enemies aboard. He gets Margarita in a secluded corner of the deck, and demands an explanation. She starts explaining about patriotism—she is a Nicaraguan, of the Conservative party—and about the Liberal revolt; then the ship slows down, stops, and three dories come alongside for a load of smuggled arms!

Suddenly a group of dark-skinned Nicaraguans surround them, and seize Margarita.

She is the daughter of the Conservative minister of war, and the gun-runners take her ashore and into the jungles, to the stronghold of the outlawed Liberal general, Zacapa. Zacapa, learning that Eddie had broken away from the gun-runners and had escaped into the water, presumably with the "Blood of Morgan," sends his spies to get him—Juan, who acts as scout for the American marines, to capture him if he reaches the marine outposts; Hugo, the Indian, and Pedro, who had been with the gun-runners, to search the seacoast and jungles. All were charged to bring him in, dead or alive.

Zacapa is, for the moment, frustrated in his evil intentions toward Margarita by the interference of his dreamy-eyed assistant, Don Adolpho, whose influential friends are backing the Liberals, and who has himself fallen under Margarita's spell. But Zacapa bides his time.

Eddie, unable to return to the ship because of the gun-runners' presence, seeing Margarita taken ashore, starts swimming toward the Nicaraguan beach.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TERROR OF THE JUNGLES.

IT was unbearably hot—that hotness which clings to the body like a damp, heated rag. Breathing was possible, but the lungs never seemed to be able to get enough air.

Clouds of steam rose from dank, thick vegetation underfoot. Daylight was partially closed out by the heavy foliated trees. Vines and creepers hung down from these trees and obstructed the way.

A man, hatless, coatless, his shirt soiled and torn, his trousers mud-splashed and ragged, was laboriously pushing his way through the tough vines and tangled creepers. A parakeet, emitting startled cries, flew up, a splash of vivid red and yellow, from its seldom disturbed home.

The man's hair was so tousled that it looked as though it had never known the restraining influence of a comb. His face was haggard, with an ugly stubble of beard covering the jaws. Above the beard, the skin was burned to a deep tan.

He reached a little clearing where the vegetation had surrendered to a bit of long, wiry grass; and the misshapen trees, with their bonds of vine, had made almost a complete circumference.

The man was tired almost to the point of death. For days he had not eaten. He had seen wild fruits growing on bushes and trees, but he had feared to pick them lest they turn out poisonous.

Always the same—the jungle, the jungle, the jungle. At times he felt that he must go mad. Hour after hour the same scene: squashy vegetation, unhealthily green; bushes, trees, and vines, so intertwined that the hardest labor was often required to push them far enough apart to allow passage.

Then the nights. The terror of them. The strange, weird noises of the awakening jungle. Like a city, the jungle had a soul—a soul that was terrible to look upon. Creatures passed him by in the night. Once, a cold, smooth surface slid over his hand, and he fled, screaming.

Baffled, lost, sick in mind and in body, Eddie Brooks threw himself full length upon the grass of the little clear-

ing. He must rest. His labored breathing, his jangled nerves told him that.

For a minute he lay there, head on his arms. Then he sat up and drew from his pocket a thing curious, incongruous in all this jungle—a tiny satin slipper.

For a long while he looked at it, turning it over slowly and gently in his hands. What a futile, artificial trifle it seemed! It belonged in some ballroom, where the air was cool with fresh breezes, where soft music played, where pretty women danced with well-fed, satisfied looking men.

Yet that slipper had brought him, in the twenty-second year of his life, into the heart of a Nicaraguan jungle. A girl's satin slipper, once fresh, smooth and gleaming white, but now stained with the salt of sea water, and the salt of his sweat.

Eddie seemed to hear a noise. He sat perfectly still, listening.

He knew that he was being followed. That morning he had reached a wide, wild meadow—there were such things in the jungles—had crossed it, and for some unknown reason had fortunately lingered at the opposite edge.

He had seen them—the old Indian, bent over almost to the ground, picking out the traces of his passage, invisible to a white man. With the Indian was a short, thickset man, whose face Eddie had seen before. Once pressed against the glass of Margarita's window in her stateroom on board the ship, and once that face was bent in hate over his, while the owner's hands were choking his very life from him.

He had had no doubt in his mind what they were doing. Tracking him. Tracking him as relentlessly and as mercilessly as bloodhounds. He also had little doubt what they would do when they caught up with him. Kill him. All for the sake of something which they called the Blood of Morgan.

Made cautious now, he had fled si-

lently from the edge of the meadow. So far, they had not caught up with him. But he knew that unless he reached help soon, the hour would come inexorably when they would have him at their mercy.

And, for all he knew, help was as hopeless, and as far away as it had been when he had left the coast.

Eddie relaxed again. His heated imagination had been playing tricks upon him. All was as silent as a tomb.

Just another minute's rest, and he must be up, fighting his well-nigh hopeless battle to keep ahead of his murderous trackers until he reached some sort of settlement that would give him aid.

SUDDENLY his blood tingled. He had heard the definite, not-to-be-mistaken sound of a human foot being withdrawn from deep, oozy mud. He remembered the place. He had just passed it, only a few minutes before. They were upon him!

Desperately he cast about him for some place to hide himself. There was just a chance that he might elude the trackers. Often, when the end of the trail is reached, there is confusion as to just exactly where the quarry is. While they were searching about for him he might be able to crawl unobserved away. Then by the time they had found out that he had given them the slip, he would be off on a fresh start in a new direction.

Eddie's roving eyes fell upon a mass of low bushes just a few feet away from him. There, he decided, would be his hiding place.

He did not stand up and walk the distance to the bushes. Shoes were firm, with sharp edges that made well defined marks for the practiced eye. Instead he worked himself forward on his stomach. He hoped that the broad surface he thus presented, and its sliding across the grass, would allow each blade to spring back into place after he passed over it.

A few seconds later, he was deep

in the bushes, lying flat on his stomach, listening, with heart pounding in his throat.

He heard a low, guttural voice in the clearing he had just vacated. Then a grunt. He judged that to have come from the Indian.

More low-voiced conversation followed. It indicated, he thought, that they had discovered that they had come to the end of the track, and were debating it.

Finally the conversation ceased. The jungle seemed more menacingly quiet than ever. While they had been talking, he had known where they were. Now, all there was left to him was to lie still, and—hope. Undoubtedly, they were engaged in seeking him.

The silence was becoming unendurable, when he heard the sound of a body moving through the bushes a few feet from where he lay. The body was approaching nearer and nearer. Eddie tensed his muscles in readiness for a leap and a fight for life when—the unknown person stopped.

Straining every nerve, Eddie waited for the man to take up the advance again. But no sound came. All was as still as death.

When he could stand it no longer, Eddie turned his head to look in the direction from which the sound of the last movement had come.

What he saw almost made his heart stop beating. The brown, seamed face of the Indian was gazing straight down at him! Then, as Eddie, fascinated, stared back, the Indian slowly turned his head to look in another direction.

Eddie could scarcely believe his eyes. Yet there was no doubt about it. The Indian now had his face turned away.

The light dawned on Eddie. The Indian had not seen him!

It was not so strange. The Indian was standing up, looking over the tops of the bushes. Eddie, pressed to the ground, was mercifully covered by the branches above his head.

Something was impelling him to

turn his head, to look to the front of him. Eddie had been feeling that urge for some time, but he had disregarded it. The Indian was more important.

But the feeling had kept growing stronger and stronger. It was like a danger, sensed but not seen.

Giving in to the urge, Eddie slowly turned his head. He had to be careful. The slightest movement in the brush would give away his position to the Indian.

The thing his eyes met petrified him with horror. There, not three feet away from him, was the deadliest snake in Central America—the bushmaster.

Its head resembled much the jaws of a miniature dragon. With tongue darting rapidly in and out the snake surveyed the prostrate American before it.

The bushmaster—the terror of the natives, because it knows no fear and runs from no one—was ready to strike. Its flat neck, like that of a cobra, was weaving. Its three feet of dark brown body were coiled.

Eddie passed through the agonies of centuries in the seconds that passed after his discovery of the bushmaster. In back of him was the Indian, still standing there, peering about among the bushes. One move on Eddie's part would bring instant detection.

In front of him was the snake. Fascinated, Eddie stared into its black, beady eyes. Those eyes were paralyzing him. He wanted to leap madly away from there, and found that he could not put motion into his body. He tried to scream, but no sound issued from his throat.

The beady eyes held his. The little tongue flickered in and out.

It was all over before Eddie realized what had happened.

A hand shot through the bushes with the swiftness of an arrow. It grabbed the bushmaster just below its head. Another hand followed the first, and in its grasp gleamed the blade of a knife.

A short sweep, and the bushmaster's deadly head was severed from the thrashing body.

For an instant afterward the hand that held the knife remained motionless before Eddie's astounded gaze. Then the hand opened ever so slightly. And—Eddie saw a small dagger, with a jewel-studded hilt.

It was more than a brain wearied by days and nights in the jungle could stand.

With a wild scream Eddie leaped to his feet and tore madly through the bushes.

CHAPTER IX.

MARINES.

"WAAAL, I'll shoot you another two-bits, pardner," stated Private Hank Betters, of the United States marines, stationed in Nicaragua. Bill Cox, comrade in arms, accepted the challenge with an air of long-suffering boredom.

The two had been on duty in that picket post for several hours now. All that had happened was heat, flies, mosquitoes; mosquitoes, flies and heat. To relieve the tedium they were indulging in that great pastime of the American soldier the world over.

"Say, Hank," drawled Bill in his lazy, Southern voice. "Where did you-all get them dice? They sholy been very good to you-all."

Hank's voice had the tang of the lumber woods—Maine, perhaps.

"They was willed to me by old Sourdough Mitchell just before he kicked off in that last scrap we had with the spics. 'Here, Hank,' he says. 'Here's somethin' t' remember your buddy by. They're a well-educated pair of bones, an' you need 'em wuss than anybody in the outfit.'"

"Gee," Hank sighed. "That was sure some game guy! Laughin' and kiddin' the sawbones t' the las' minute. You can't beat a guy like that."

"Well, thirty of the damned spics went to keep 'im company," stated Bill, almost pridefully.

"Yea-ah," agreed Hank, shifting his long legs and letting fly a stream of dark brown juice from his mouth. "Yea-ah. But it's beyond me what the hell it's all about. The spics kill Sourdough, an' we kills thirty spics. I ask you, what th' hell's it all about? I ain't got nothin' personal 'gainst them damned spics—'cept that they're as dirty as a lazy farmer, and as crooked as a corkscrew."

"You listen, big boy," said Bill, and prepared himself comfortably to propound weighty diplomatic matters, "an' I'll explain the whole business to you-all. These people can't agree on who's goin' to be boss. An' their idea of an election is the side which has got the mos' guns wins. Every once in awhile they take it into their heads to go a-shootin' up the place. That endangers the lives and properties of a lot of Americans and foreigners. Uncle Samuel ain't a gonna stand for no such business. So he sends you and me, an' the rest of the marines down here to keep order till the big fuss has blown over, an' the government gets in runnin' order again. *Sabe?*"

"Yea-ah," replied Hank lazily, letting fly with another brown stream, "I guess so. But, I sure hope we get home in time for Christmas. I like a little cold snap t' my winters."

The sun was very hot, and each man was now lying prone on his stomach, gazing lazily at the beginnings of the jungle not over five hundred feet away from them.

"Say," said Hank, after a minute's thought, "what has this here guy we be hunting for—Za—Zacapa—got to do with all this you're tellin' me?"

"Well, he's just a plain, onery bandit. They tell me he started out t' run fer president. When he got beat, he wouldn't accept the decision. So, he got him an army together, an' started to burn towns, kill innocent people, an'

such. The reg'lar government couldn't handle him, so Uncle Sam has to come down an' do it." Bill heaved a lazy, good-natured sigh. "It's a hell of a—"

He stopped short, staring at Hank.

Hank's body had suddenly stiffened. He was peering fixedly from underneath the brim of his campaign hat at some point in the jungle.

"What—what is it, Hank?" whispered Bill.

Hank reached backward for his Springfield, slowly drawing it toward him.

"Looks like one o' them spics runnin' crazy in the jungle," he breathed. "They get that way sometimes."

BILL stared in the direction of Hank's gaze. He saw a man, hatless, coatless, shirt and trousers torn to ribbons, crashing madly through bushes and vines.

"He's a-comin' this way," Bill whispered, and at the same time he turned down the safety lock of his rifle.

"Halt!" roared Hank.

If the wild creature out there heard, he gave no sign, and continued his hysterical plunge toward them.

"Halt—or I fire!" cried Hank at the top of his voice.

"Let him have it," said Bill evenly.

"Ef he gets up too close, no tellin' what damage he'll do. Them spics are hard to kill when they run loco that-away."

Hank leveled his rifle, and drew a bead on the advancing figure. Bill calmly fingered the trigger of his own gun.

Crack! The echo of the report was thickly swallowed in the depths of the jungle.

Hank knew that he had missed. With a muttered curse, he yanked back the bolt of his rifle to insert a fresh cartridge into the chamber.

At the same instant, Bill's rifle roared at his ear.

"Don't shoot him!" Hank heard Bill crying. "My God! He's a white

man! There was a dirty Indian right behind him with a knife as big as your arm. He was goin' t' let the other fellow have it when I saw him. Betcha I got him right smack between the eyes!"

Amazed, the two marines awaited the man stumbling toward them. They could see that his strength was about gone. A meaningless jumble of words came out of his mouth.

They caught him as he fell.

"The Blood of Morgan—" he screamed, while he struggled with them with his last ounce of strength. "Never mind—Margarita—I will not let them—get—the slipper."

"Daft! Plumb daft!" said Hank, as he inadvertently swallowed a lump of tobacco. Whereupon, he started to choke.

Bill, in the meanwhile, had left the post, and was cautiously nearing the spot where he had seen the Indian, knife upraised, ready to drive it into the back of the fleeing white man.

Sure enough. Bill had "called" his shot: right between the eyes!

From the shelter of a thick clump of vines and creepers, hate-filled eyes stared out at the marine. Pedro, again, had failed his mission.

A COMPANY of United States marines garrisoned this outpost at a little Nicaraguan village at the edge of the jungle. They were, it might be said, the advance guard of a battalion, which lay encamped some miles to their rear. Slowly but surely, the whole force had been advancing upon the territory overrun by the bandit Zacapa.

At the first one of a row of small, brown wall tents set apart from the many rows of pup tents, flapped the guidon of the company. There was the company headquarters.

Captain Holden, commanding, was in conference with his medical officer.

"He certainly is a peculiar case, doc. How in the devil he happened to be lost

in this part of the country is beyond me."

"Very strange," replied the medical officer, shaking his head. "I remember the day they brought him to the hospital tent. The most I could get out of him was that he was looking for a lady to give her a satin slipper. Hum! Very strange! We found the slipper all right, but he wouldn't give it up. Crazy with fever. Fought us like a demon until we let him take it to bed with him. Now that he is better, I've been able to get a little more out of him. Claims he was thrown off a boat off the Mosquito Coast. Said that the Liberals kidnaped a lady he was with, at the same time. I give it up!" the medical officer sighed. "It's the strangest thing I ever heard of. Well, he'll be in to see you in a little while. Told him that he would have to go back with the commissary train when it brought up our supplies to-day. He doesn't seem to like the idea very well."

As the medical officer was leaving the tent, Captain Holden asked:

"Have you any idea where that Mexican scout of ours has got to? I've been trying to find him for the last couple of days. We're going to need him because the major has decided to push into the jungles this week. Folks back in León are getting uneasy about this fellow Zacapa. He was on a rampage the other day. Usual stunt: attacking a town, and then beating it with all the goods and cattle he could carry. By Heaven! I'd like to know where he hangs out! I'm getting sick of this heat and this country."

The doctor reflected.

"Seems to me I saw Juan hanging around the hospital tent the day they brought young Brooks in. I can't swear to it. But I thought he was."

"All right," the captain said. Adding an oath, he continued, "Never can depend on these damned people! Never around when they're needed. And, I wouldn't trust one any farther than a forty-five 'll throw."

The medical officer left. Shortly after, the flap of the tent was drawn aside by a thin, haggard-looking youth. He was sloppily attired in a marine khaki blouse and long khaki trousers which one of the officers had given him. A marine campaign hat covered his sandy hair.

If Margarita had seen Eddie then, she would have been shocked, such were the ravages the jungle, the fever, the terrible experiences had made on him.

"COME in!" cried Captain Holden cordially, as he arose to his feet. "How you feeling?"

"Pretty well, sir," Eddie replied. "Just a bit shaky still, but I guess that's to be expected for awhile."

"You'll be all right after you get out of this God-forsaken country," assured the captain. "I've got good news for you. I'm shipping you back to the base this afternoon with the commissary train. From there you can easily get to Corinto, and secure a steamer going to Panama."

Eddie's face clouded.

"Wouldn't it be possible, sir, to let me remain here for awhile? I understand that your mission is the capture of the bandit Zacapa. Somehow, I feel that Miss Rodriguez is in his power. At least, if she isn't, he might know what has happened to her."

"I'm sorry, Brooks," the captain said kindly. "I'd like to oblige you if I could. But, I cannot let you stay here. This is a fighting force, in the enemy's country."

"But I could join the company—" Eddie's voice was eager.

"You could, but I cannot let you. You know yourself that it would ruin you at West Point. The only way I could let you stay here would be to enlist you as a marine, and the Military Academy forbids its cadets to serve in any force while they are cadets. No, Brooks. I advise you to go on to Panama, and forget all this. You've got

one chance in a thousand to find the girl. And—pardon me—less chance than that of finding her alive. After you did find her, I doubt if you would find that it was worth your trouble. From what I have heard, I take it that she is an adventuress, pure and simple. I would count it fortunate that you escaped from her as lucky as you have.”

Eddie was silent for a minute. He felt that his last chance of ever seeing Margarita again was vanishing.

“But, Captain Holden,” he appealed. There was a note of hopeless desperation in his voice. “Couldn’t you just let me hang around? I would keep out of the way. I must see that girl again. I am carrying something which I know is of very great value to her. Besides—I love her.”

“A satin slipper can easily be replaced, but your life cannot,” replied the marine captain patiently. He forebore to speak of love. “While you are with me I feel responsible for you. I cannot, I will not accept that responsibility. I have not the right. If anything happened to you, what could I say to the Army Department—to your own father and mother? No; I’m sorry, Mr. Brooks, but I think you had better make ready to return with the supply train this afternoon.”

With heavy heart, Eddie realized that Captain Holden was right. It was unfair to inflict the responsibility of Eddie’s presence on him. The commanding officer of an invading force is responsible for the safety of all who seek refuge beneath his colors. Captain Holden was only doing his duty in returning Eddie to civilization.

But Margarita, out there in the vast stillness beyond the jungle—what indignities and tortures was she suffering? She had been so lovely, so gentle. Her voice had been music. Her laughter a song in itself.

Eddie’s fingers caressed the poor satin slipper in his pocket. Unbidden tears scalded his eyelids.

“Very well, sir!” his voice trem-

bled. It was like bidding good-by—forever—to Margarita.

THE mules of the commissary train plodded along the grassy road that was hardly more than a trail. “Mule skimmers,” those marines in charge of the train, looked ridiculously out of place as they bobbed along on mules hardly as big as themselves. Each soldier was armed, for more than once supply trains had been known to have been ambushed by the bandits.

Twice each week the train of mules made its way from the base at the battalion to the outpost company of Captain Holden. It carried the staples of military life: bread, flour, canned goods.

Now, it had made its last trip of the week, and was on its way back to the battalion.

So engrossed was Eddie in his somber thoughts, that he scarcely noted the country through which they were passing. He was going home. The great adventure, so tragically ended, had left him a soiled satin slipper, and his memories. The sergeant who rode alongside of him was speaking again.

“There’s a healthy place for an ambush, if I ever saw one! I allus feels easier after we pass it.”

For the sake of politeness, Eddie looked in the direction which the sergeant had indicated.

He had to agree. The path, which had been across a rolling plain, dotted here and there with clumps of bushes, was now entering the mouth of a rock-scarred, wooded ravine.

Perhaps they were about five hundred yards into the ravine when the attack, which the sergeant had feared on so many trips, broke loose. There was a fusillade of rifle shots, shrill, foreign cries, and the deadly *rat-tat-tat* of a machine gun cutting loose.

“Take cover!” roared the sergeant. “Let the danged mules go!”

There was no confusion. Every marine there had been in a similar situa-

tion before. The whine of bullets was not strange music to their ears.

Like one man, they slid from their mules, and disappeared behind trees and rocks which lined the trail.

Hardly a moment too soon! Hordes of ragged brown men rushed down from the sides of the ravine, yelling as they came. They paid for disclosing themselves. Springfields spat nastily, and some of the attackers pitched forward, to roll over and over to the bottom of the ravine, never to yell again.

Eddie had been so deep in the misery of his thoughts, that he was taken utterly by surprise. He saw the sergeant leave him precipitately, and he was confused by the din of shots and yells. It was his first time under fire.

It finally percolated through his brain to take cover, as he saw the marines doing.

Too late! The brown men were upon him. Dirty hands clutched him, and dragged him from his mule. Fighting with all his strength, he resisted being dragged away. But there were too many of them, and they bore him along. The attack was like a sudden shower.

The marines, who had settled themselves to make a business of the defense, appeared to be disgusted at the sudden silence of the place. Finally, they cautiously ventured from cover, and started to round up the mules.

The sergeant missed Eddie. After a search for him proved useless, the sergeant removed his campaign hat, and quizzically rubbed his shiny bald head.

"Gosh!" he murmured. "Gosh! I suppose I'll get hell fer this."

CHAPTER X.

THE TALE OF MORGAN.

DON ADOLPHO had come to take Margarita for a walk. Sometimes she walked alone; sometimes with General Zacapa; and sometimes with Don Adolpho. If she happened to be

walking with one, and the other passed by, civil enough greetings would be exchanged, but the looks would be dark.

On this day, they chose the path that led to the rear extremity of the fort. There was no stockade here, or need for one. The fort stood upon a barren shoulder of the mountain. In front of it was the forty-foot chasm crossed by the rude wooden bridge. The back of it dropped down almost perpendicularly to the foot of the mountain. Zacapa had chosen well the site of his citadel.

Ever since her capture, Margarita had been playing the game of the two men. With Zacapa she was haughty, contemptuous. With Don Adolpho she was as agreeable as she dared be.

But the game was getting discouraging. She could not hope to play it forever, successfully. One day, one of the men would tire of the game, and then she would be lost. It was necessary that she escape before then.

She had had, in the first days, some foolish hope of succor from the outside. Eddie was still free. If he only knew enough to communicate with the proper authorities.

Yet, even while she had hoped, she realized how useless it was. Granting that Eddie had escaped, which was most doubtful, with Juan, Pedro and the Indian searching for him, how would he know where to find her? Even if he found out where she was, what military force in Nicaragua was powerful enough to capture this mountain citadel of Zacapa?

Her one hope lay in Don Adolpho. If she escaped, it would have to be through him.

As yet, Don Adolpho had proved intractable. Her hours were numbered. She could see that in the burning glances, growing hotter each day, of Zacapa. He would not wait much longer, Don Adolpho or no Don Adolpho.

In silence, for a little while, Margarita and Don Adolpho stood staring down into the valley far below them.

"Tell me, Don Adolpho," she began softly, "do you ever grow tired of all this, and long to go back to your poems in León?"

He started. She had placed a finger upon his very thoughts. Much, much, he wanted to be back to his writing in León—with her.

"At times, *señorita*," he shrugged his shoulders. "It is but natural. War is for soldiers to fight, and poets to sing about."

"I, too, am weary of this place," she said, studying him narrowly between her long lashes, "and would like to be far-away, even in—León."

Her words had touched the target. He turned toward her, his arms reaching out to infold her.

"With me—some day, after all this is over—in León?" he begged.

Coquettishly, she avoided his hateful arms.

"Ah, but it is so hard to escape from here," she said, as if seeking to turn the conversation into different channels.

He misunderstood her meaning.

"I speak not of escape," he said stiffly. "Don Adolpho comes and goes as he wishes. And he has his noble cause to think about."

Whatever Don Adolpho's nature was, he did not intend to be a deserter from his cause. Like most dreamers, he was fanatical in his loyalty to his ideals, no matter the cost.

An orderly interrupted them. He saluted Don Adolpho, and then turned to Margarita.

"General Zacapa would see the *señorita* at his quarters at once."

A chill fear was clutching at the heart of Margarita. He had never sent for her before. The tone of the order had indicated that the summons was imperative, decisive. Had his desires finally overcome his cautiousness? Had he reached the decision to be balked no longer by Don Adolpho, friends or no friends?

Don Adolpho and the girl looked

into each other's faces. She could see by his expression that his thoughts were the same as hers.

"Perhaps it is too late for León," she whispered.

"*Señorita, señorita!*" he muttered. "Perhaps to-night—if it is not too late."

GENERAL ZACAPA—and one other—were in the room of the red flag and desk.

Margarita clutched her breast with trembling hands as she saw the back of the man who stood before Zacapa's desk. *O, Madre de Dios*—it isn't—it couldn't be! Insufferable joy filled her heart.

"Eddie!" she cried, her soul in her voice, as she ran to him, arms outstretched.

He turned, and caught her to him.

"Margarita! Margarita!" he murmured brokenly.

The joy vanished. A heavy, nameless dread, like a cold weight, began to tug at her heart. General Zacapa had risen from his desk. His thin, cruel face was grinning sardonically at them.

Gradually, she pushed Eddie from her. Bitterness and misery brought a quick tear to her eye. The irony of it all. Yes, they were together again, but now two, instead of one, were in the clutches of the ruthless bandit, Zacapa.

"Very pretty, *señorita!*" his evil voice assured her. "The *señor* is fortunate. Now that we have had our little reunion, let us proceed to business. *Señor*, the Blood of Morgan—"

Zacapa held out his hand.

Eddie looked at the slim, brown, tapering fingers. Then his gaze turned to Margarita, puzzled.

"Come, come!" rapped the general. "I have been put to too much inconvenience to wait longer. The Blood of Morgan, *señor!*"

"Give him the satin slipper, Eddie," the girl said slowly.

Without a word, Eddie dug down into his trousers, and produced the tiny, soiled satin slipper.

Zacapa took it, and broke into an exultant laugh.

"Ah," he bowed to Margarita. "Very clever, *señorita*! Very clever indeed! Who would think to look for the Blood of Morgan in a satin slipper, particularly if the lady happened to be wearing it? But, Zacapa gets everything, sooner or later. It is impossible to outwit him."

He bent a quick look at Margarita. She recognized the inference of his last remarks.

Sooner or later Zacapa would get her, too, despite Don Adolpho, despite her very clever self!

Zacapa held the slipper before him like a connoisseur of such dainty, feminine articles. He was elated. He was in glorious good humor. The thing which he had sought half the continent for, was at last in his hands.

He felt philosophical.

"To think," he said, "that so precious a thing should be carried in such a lowly, commonplace object—a shoe! Thus it is with this world, *señor* and *señorita*, the lowliest things are oftentimes nearest the highest. How is it," he asked, turning to Eddie, "that you could resist such temptation? I believe if I had had this slipper as you have had it, I would have been off to the far corners of the earth to enjoy my treasure."

"I do not know what you mean," replied Eddie, thoroughly mystified.

"Is it possible! Ho! ho! It is amusing—you did not know that you were carrying the Blood of Morgan! You did not know that you had many fortunes in your grasp!" The general could not restrain his genial mirth.

"What is this Blood of Morgan?" demanded Eddie.

The name had followed him like a curse.

The general seated himself at his desk. He placed the slipper in front

of him, where he could admire it with his eyes.

"THE *señor* does not know the story of the Blood of Morgan?"

It is well known to us of Nicaragua. I will tell you, so that you may regret more bitterly that which you have missed. Doubtless, the *señor* has read the story about the pirate Morgan sacking the old city of Panama? Well, the Blood of Morgan belonged to that very pirate. It was a ruby of matchless size and incomparable beauty. There was no other precious stone like it in all the world.

"Morgan got it from a ship he looted, which was returning home from the Orient. Struck by its flawless beauty, its uncanny resemblance to thick, red blood when the wound is deep, Morgan swore that thereafter he would wear it about his neck as a talisman, and that it should be known as the Blood of Morgan. The talisman became famous among the buccaneers that hunted the tropical waters of the Americas. A superstition concerning it arose. It was said that should he lose the Blood of Morgan he would surely die.

"Many attempts were made to steal the ruby from Morgan. And, each time, the would-be thief died a most terrible death. Then came the time when Morgan attacked the city of Panama. As in all his other ventures, he was successful. How could he fail, with the Blood of Morgan about his neck? The city won, Morgan's men gave themselves over to loot and rape. Morgan himself seized upon a Spanish woman of high degree. She noticed the leather bag hanging about his neck and asked why. Being well in his cups, Morgan told her. He also told her the boast: should the Blood of Morgan leave him, he would die.

"That night, the lady took the ruby from him while he slept, and passed it out to her brother, who was waiting by the window. When Morgan awoke,

and discovered his precious talisman missing, he went into a high rage. He severed the unfortunate lady's head with one terrible blow of his knife. But it was too late! Her brother had fled deep into the jungles of Central America, where no man could find him. When Morgan had gone, he crept out of his hiding place. The Blood of Morgan remained in the possession of the descendants of this young Spaniard, and when the family migrated to Nicaragua the ruby was brought with it."

General Zacapa finished his tale. Complete silence possessed the room.

Eddie had listened intently to the absorbing story. To say that he was surprised to learn that the frivolous slipper which he had carried through so much danger contained a ruby of fabulous worth would be saying little.

The mystery of the Blood of Morgan was solved. No wonder men died in their desperate attempts to attain it. Like all such precious, famous stones, it had a history of blood. Steeped in the blood of the pirate Morgan's unfortunate victims. Steeped in the blood of the chauffeur on the docks of New York. Steeped in the blood of the little Central American on the deck of the steamship Southern Star.

But, what relation had Margarita to the stone? Eddie turned a sober, questioning gaze upon her. With clear, level eyes, she returned his glance.

General Zacapa drew the slipper to him.

"I sought the stone, *señor*, that I might use it to obtain money for my cause. Guns and bullets require money, much money."

Zacapa turned the slipper over in his hands. He drew a knife from his pocket.

"Now," he breathed, his breath coming fast, "we shall see the beautiful Blood of Morgan!"

The faces of all three were bent toward the desk. The general began

to cut the heel from the upper. He was finding it a difficult task, for the heel had been attached unusually strongly.

At last, with a grunt of satisfaction, he broke the heel loose. A cunningly contrived little cavity, extending about halfway down into the heel, met their gaze.

Zacapa's eyes widened. His hands gripped the edge of the desk.

"*Carramba!*" he cried. "It is empty!"

Frozen, the three of them stared at each other.

CHAPTER XI.

MURDER IN THE NIGHT.

BECAUSE he could not tell what had happened to the Blood of Morgan, Eddie was condemned by the enraged Zacapa to die by rifle fire at sunrise.

Back and forth, he paced across the earthen floor of the dingy, foul-smelling hut into which he had been thrown. At last he halted his nervous pacing, and stood by the single window of the hut. Thick iron bars crossed the view outside.

A great tropic moon was up. It shed a silver radiance about the fort. Just outside Eddie's window a sentry slowly walked his lonely beat. The hour was late, for the evening noises had long since died away.

Eddie gazed out at the moon. It would be his last. On the morrow, with the coming of the sun, he would die.

Die! It did not seem real to him yet. The whole train of fantastic happenings since he had left Garry beside the shiny limousine in little old New York did not seem real. If he pinched himself he would wake up in his white cot at West Point. He was having a long, grotesque nightmare.

Yet, the cool feel of the bars to his hands was not of a dream. The steady

footfall of the sentry outside his window was not of a dream. No. This was very much real! To-morrow he would die!

Never in his life had Eddie seen a man in such rage as General Zacapa had been when he discovered the absence of the ruby. For an instant, it had looked as if he were about to kill Eddie where he stood. His riding crop had been uplifted, his face had been distorted.

Margarita had thrown herself between them, imploring mercy for Eddie. The general had finally dropped his crop.

Eddie's blood still boiled when he recalled the words of the general: "I, at least, have you, *señorita*!"

She had shrank from the evil leer of the slim general, with his polished boots.

The thoughts of her struggling in the arms of the lean leader of the bandits forced Eddie to take up again his distracted pacing of his cage. The desire to leap at the bars, and tear them from their sockets was overpowering him. He knew, however, that the attempt would be useless. He had tried the bars, the door, the walls. Everything was firm, unyielding. They had him safe. His chance of escaping was zero. Even if he did accomplish the impossible, and win out of the hut, there was still the sentry on guard. Even supposing that he slipped by the sentry unseen, what chance had he to escape from the fort? The stockade was guarded. The bridge that crossed the chasm, he had heard, was always drawn in at night.

The night must have been half gone when he heard a slight noise at the door of the hut. Some one was cautiously drawing back the great, wooden bolt that locked him in.

Eddie shrank back against the far wall. Were they coming for him so soon? He decided that he would fight for his life. He would wrest a gun from one of the guards. When he

died, he would carry as many of the brown men as he could with him. Some would pay for the sufferings of Margarita.

The door swung gently open, and a black form was silhouetted against the dark blue of the sky.

"Come," a soft voice ordered.

For an instant, undecided, Eddie hung against the wall.

"Come," the voice repeated. "I am a friend."

A friend! Eddie had no friend in this den of murderers! Yet the secrecy with which this man had entered the hut spoke in his favor. Eddie had nothing to lose; any risk was better than waiting until morning to be dragged out and shot like a dog.

Eddie crossed silently to the man's side. In another instant they were moving quickly away from the hut.

"**H**ALT!" The sudden challenge came through the night. The sentry had seen them!

Eddie moved as if to run, but the other quickly grabbed his wrist.

"*Ssh!*" whispered the stranger. "Trust me. I shall handle him."

The sentry came up.

"Oh, it is you, Don Adolpho!" He saluted. Then, recognizing Eddie, he stared.

"The general wishes to interview the Americano again."

The sentry was satisfied. Shifting his gun to his left shoulder, he said:

"*Si, si!* We shall have a grand shooting in the morning. Death to the *gringos*!"

Don Adolpho took his course straight down the street. Eddie was bitterly disappointed. He had been thinking hopefully of escape—only to learn that he was being carried before Zacapa again. He wondered what whim caused the general to summon him at that hour of the morning.

His wonder increased when they passed the headquarters, silent and dark. His unknown guide, this "Don

Adolpho," was taking him away from the cluster of huts, and across the meadow in rear of the fort.

A figure rose out of the darkness before them.

"Is it you, Eddie?" a dear, familiar voice spoke.

Margarita! Eddie's heart leaped. It was an escape! Whether it was or not, he almost did not care, so long as he and Margarita were together. This wonderful, clever girl, somehow, had contrived a way! At what promise, Eddie did not know, fortunate for him.

Don Adolpho was impatient at the girl's very evident interest in the American.

"Come!" he said gruffly. "We must be far away from here by dawn."

General Zacapa had selected a wonderful place for a fort. But he had overlooked, in the selecting of it, one of the greatest military maxims—always have a clear line of retreat. As there was no way of assailing the fort, so also was there no way of retreating from it, if ever a retreat should conceivably be necessary.

That is, there was no retreat which could be used by a large body of men. However, Zacapa and a few of his lieutenants knew of one path of retreat which could be used by individuals.

It was down this path that Don Adolpho was now leading Margarita and Eddie. Taking its winding course, the path led from the meadow in rear of the fort down the almost perpendicular side of the mountain to the valley below.

Bushes hid the stony way from view. They also were invaluable aids in the descent, which would have been practically impossible but for them.

Sliding a few feet, catching onto a bush here and there to keep their descent from becoming too rapid, the three made their way down the face of the mountain. Care was the watchword. One stumble, and the unfortunate one would go rolling and turning

over until he reached the bottom. Such a mishap might mean death or, at least, broken bones.

It was hard work. The darkness made the task doubly difficult. Don Adolpho was in the lead, for he knew the way. In back of him was Margarita. Eddie brought up the rear.

At last, sore from their exertions, they reached the bottom. Don Adolpho disappeared into the night.

"Where is he going?" whispered Eddie.

"To get the horses he put here this afternoon."

"Who is he?"

"Don Adolpho, a lieutenant of Zacapa's."

"A lieutenant of Zacapa's! Then, why is he doing this? Is he safe?"

"Safe—for a price," the girl returned soberly.

"For a price? What do you mean, Margarita? You sound so funny!"

"Nothing, nothing, *mi amigo*," she hastily assured him. "It is all right. Don Adolpho is a friend of ours. He will lead us to safety."

She did not add, "and me to Léon," although she thought it.

Her reply assuaged the anxiety of Eddie. Together they waited in silence for the return of Don Adolpho.

NEITHER saw the shadow which slid into the clump of bushes behind them. Neither sensed the gleaming eyes peering out at them. Nor did they feel the presence of the cold knife which the shadow held in its hand.

They heard the clumping of horses coming up the path. Soon Don Adolpho appeared, leading three nervous animals.

He helped Margarita to mount. Eddie was already upon his horse, when the shadow silently sprang from the bushes.

The knife was lifted once and then driven home. Don Adolpho, preparing to mount his horse, gave a low groan

and crumpled to the ground. Then the shadow turned swiftly and ran toward Eddie.

Margarita was close enough so that she could see the features of the attacker. She recognized the spy, Juan. He had been returning from one of his treacherous excursions. He too knew the secret path, and used it at night, when the bridge was drawn.

Eddie turned in his saddle to meet the attack. The Mexican was armed, and Eddie, already handicapped by being mounted on a horse, had only his two hands to defend himself.

"Spur your horse, for the love of God!" cried Margarita. She knew that the Mexican must be an expert fighter with the knife. Once he closed in on Eddie, he would kill him.

In the nick of time Eddie drove his heels into his animal. The horse jumped forward, out of reach of the cursing Mexican.

"Ride! Ride for your life!" begged Margarita, urging her horse past Eddie.

It went against his principles to desert a friend. Don Adolpho was a friend of his, for had he not helped them to escape?

Yet there was Margarita to be thought of. Eddie's chivalrous principles would have led him to give battle to the Mexican, no matter how hopeless it seemed, for the sake of Don Adolpho. But there was a strong probability that Don Adolpho was already dead; and if the Mexican buried his knife in Eddie, as he had done with Don Adolpho, Margarita, although she might be able to escape on her horse, would be alone, unprotected.

So, regretfully, Eddie allowed the horse full rein. He felt like a coward, running away.

He caught up with Margarita. They listened, as they galloped along, for sounds of pursuit. Except for the dull pounding of their own horses' hoofs, there was no sound in the vast valley. The Mexican evidently had not seen

fit to use Don Adolpho's horse to pursue them.

After they had put several miles between them and the fort they brought their horses down to a walk. The horses had been breathing heavily, and needed the rest.

"I hated to leave him," said Eddie, still thinking of Don Adolpho. His conscience bothered him. Perhaps the first blow had only slightly wounded Don Adolpho. Eddie had no doubt what the Mexican would do with his second thrust.

"I too am sorry, in one way," said Margarita softly. "In another way, I am not."

"But he befriended us! Without his aid you would still be in the fort, at the mercy of Zacapa. And I would be waiting—for sunrise."

"Oh, do not say it!" she shuddered. "I say I am sorry he is killed. But I would rather have him dead than be his wife."

"His wife! Margarita! Oh, I am sorry! Was that to be the price of our freedom?"

She nodded her head. She did not tell Eddie that that was the price of *his* freedom. She would not have bought her own at such a price. Rather she would have driven a dagger in her breast.

THEY rode on in silence, each occupied with his own thoughts.

Eddie, thinking of the repulsive sacrifice she would have made; Margarita wondering about the ruby.

"Tell me," she asked, "where is the Blood of Morgan?"

His look was almost reproachful. "How should I know, Margarita?"

She reined in her horse. "You do not know!"

"Of course not!"

"Then, it is gone!" Her voice was tragic.

"Are you sure," he asked, "that it was in the slipper when you gave it to me?"

"Positive, *mi amigo*."

"That is very strange! It has never been out of my possession since you gave it to me." Memories returned to him. "There was just once, when I was in a hospital of a marine camp. I was out of my mind with fever."

He paused, then shook his head.

"No. No one could have taken it there. They told me that even when I did not know what I was doing I insisted on keeping the satin slipper. I slept with it under my pillow."

"Could no one remove the slipper while you lay there with fever, take out the ruby, and return the slipper to your pillow?" she suggested.

"It is possible," he admitted. "But no one was around me except the marines. They did not know of the existence of the Blood of Morgan, so they could not very well have taken it."

She had to be satisfied, but she was not convinced.

"Listen!" she said. "Do you hear anything?"

Eddie strained his ears, and heard nothing but the gentle swish of low bushes as they brushed his knees.

"I hear nothing, Margarita."

The girl relapsed into her own thoughts again. After a minute Eddie asked:

"Do you know where we are going?"

She shook her head.

"Then we're lost!" he concluded.

"Here's hoping," he continued grimly, "that it won't turn out the way things did for me the last time I was lost."

They were passing through a rolling valley, well padded with grass. Clumps of low bushes were everywhere. In the distance, silhouetted against the sky, was a range of black mountains. Thither they were heading. On the other side of the range might lie civilization.

This time it was Eddie who suddenly raised his head to listen. A slight tropical breeze had sprung into being.

Unmistakably it bore the far-off, in-

distinct thuddings of what might be drums—or many horses. Eddie chose to think the sound came from the latter. Many horses galloping madly in hot pursuit. Evidently the Mexican had carried the news to Zacapa, and he had ordered out his horsemen to the chase.

"We've got to ride for it!" he cried to Margarita, who had been anxiously awaiting the result of his listening. "We'll try to make the mountains. There's a chance that there is a settlement on the other side."

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN.

EDDIE thanked his lucky stars that Don Adolpho had chosen the best of horses. Neck and neck the two animals ran, mile after mile.

Now the bandits had come into sight upon the valley. They were still a great distance off, and appeared as an indistinct black mass moving against the horizon.

The range of mountains loomed larger and larger. Could their horses hold up the terrific pace? Would they be able to find a path over the mountains, or would they find nothing but trees and tangled underbrush, through which it would be impossible to take a horse?

So much depended upon the mountain country. Eddie worried about it, as they pounded along. If they had to desert their horses and attempt to climb the wooded sides on foot, their chances of escaping the men of Zacapa were dangerously small.

Margarita was not made for climbing through the brush of a mountain-side. They would have to find their safety in hiding. What chance to hide successfully, with so many seekers?

They had not even a weapon between them. Not so much as a pen-knife. Yet Eddie was determined that

she should not fall into Zacapa's hands again—even if he had to choke her life out with his own hands.

Faster, faster, faster. The flanks of the horses were laboring. And still Eddie and Margarita spurred them on with their heels. Everything depended on the mountains.

Dawn was just graying the sky when they reached the foot of the range. A couple of miles behind them, across the valley, they could see the men of Zacapa flogging their weary steeds.

Fortune was with Eddie and Margarita this time. The mountainside, except for low, matted brush, was clear. They found a trail. Almost wiped out it was, from little use. Nevertheless, it was a track between the brush.

Their tired horses began the upward climb. The pace seemed desperately slow to Eddie, though he knew that the animals could not do more. If the riders were to urge them now, they would drop.

There was one satisfaction. The horses of the pursuing Liberals must be just as weary.

Halfway up the mountain Eddie turned to gaze back. As he expected and feared, the troop was still following them, winding about the path in single file.

Eddie centered his thoughts upon the top of the mountain. What sight would it bring? He dreaded reaching it, for fear that there would be nothing but an empty side, perhaps another valley as empty as the one through which they had come.

If such were the case, then they were done. Even now Margarita was swaying in her saddle, compressing her lips to keep back the sound of pain.

They reached the summit. Eddie's heart sank. A quick glance had told him that there was no succor in the view spread out before him. A blood-red sun had suddenly shot over the horizon, bathing the deserted valley at their feet with warm, golden rays. In the distance, dark green in the early

morning sunlight, was another range of mountains.

There would be help on the other side of that, thought Eddie bitterly, but they'd never be able to reach it.

Again his eyes searched the side of the range on which they were.

Nothing. Nothing, unless—

About halfway down the mountainside, about a mile from where they stood, was what seemed a cultivated field. Small green trees were growing in even rows.

Searching more minutely, Eddie made out the roofs of some houses. These roofs had taken on the color of the surrounding landscape so much that they had escaped Eddie's first rapid glance.

Margarita had fallen forward against the horse's mane. Grasping the bridle of her horse, Eddie started downward.

AT first Eddie's thundering knocks on the barred door of the largest house of the group of three failed to bring response. What irony if the place were deserted! Supporting the utterly fatigued Margarita with one arm, Eddie pounded the door again with his free hand. Over his shoulder he could see Zacapa's men slowly beginning the descent of the mountain, single file.

After what seemed to be an interminable time there were sounds in the house. Suddenly the bolt was shot back and a frightened face peered forth.

Eddie nearly dropped his burden. The flat blue eyes, the plain face could belong to no other than Annie Pedler, that simpering girl on the Southern Star!

So this was the coffee farm which James Pedler had bought! Small wonder that the former owners had sold it to him! The American was fortunate that he had not been robbed and murdered the minute he had arrived from the steamer.

Annie let out a frightened howl and closed the door with a bang.

Eddie heard voices inside.

"Ghosts!" whimpered Annie. "I tell you I saw them, ma!"

"Nonsense, child!" came Mrs. Pedler's only too well remembered sharp voice. "There are no such things, I tell you! James, go to the door and see what it is before this child goes half out of her wits."

Despairingly Eddie glanced over his shoulder. Zacapa's men were drawing nearer and nearer. The burden on his arm was becoming heavier.

"Open the door, Mr. Pedler!" he cried. "For God's sake!"

The door opened cautiously. The black nose of a rifle came forth, then the rather white face of Mr. Pedler. When he saw the two standing before the door the rifle dropped out of his hands and clattered to the floor.

"Can it be!" he murmured, rubbing his hands across his eyes. "The young cadet and the Spanish lady! Why, why," he stammered, "you're supposed to be drowned! Lost overboard one night at sea!"

Eddie was becoming frantic at his stupidity. The bandits were drawing closer by the minute.

"My God, man, don't be so foolish! Here we are, in flesh and blood—alive. Alive! Do you hear?" Eddie shouted. "But we won't be very much longer, if you leave us standing here. See those men coming down the mountain-side? Those are Nicaraguan bandits, rebels, Liberals! Anything you want to call them! They are after us. But do you think they'll stop at that, with a nice farmhouse to loot? They haven't had any breakfast, and they've been riding all night."

Mr. Pedler was convinced. One look at the men winding down the mountainside had more than made up his mind.

He acted with suddenness. With a yank he pulled Eddie and Margarita in through the door. Another quick

movement, and the bolt was shot home.

"James!"

Mr. Pedler looked guilty.

"Whom have you there?"

Without waiting for a reply Mrs. Pedler came out of a back room to investigate. She gave a little scream when she saw her visitors. But Mrs. Pedler was a woman hard to surprise.

"And you let them in!" She turned accusingly to Mr. Pedler. "James! You should be ashamed of yourself! After the way they acted on the boat! It was simply scandalous! I always thought she killed that poor Central American. And the way they both disappeared together! You can't tell me that there wasn't something wrong there, James Pedler! You should be ashamed to let them in the same house with your wife and only child."

Almost subdued by the relentless tirade, Mr. Pedler made one attempt.

"But, ma, they's bandits chasin' 'em!"

"What do you care? Serves them right, I say. The bandits have probably got a reason, I dare say," said Mrs. Pedler, turning up her righteous nose in the direction of Margarita.

EDDIE had listened to the dialogue in amazement. Now cold fury shook him.

"Mr. Pedler," he cried, "are you a man—and an American? Can you turn a countryman and a helpless woman out to be slaughtered by ruthless bandits? What are you, anyway? Haven't you any backbone of your own? Or are you a jellyfish—supported by this yapping woman?"

"James!" screeched Mrs. Pedler.

Mr. Pedler winced at the stinging accusations. He knew that what Eddie had said was true. He had always given in to Mrs. Pedler, rather than be tormented by her sharp, unrelenting tongue. For the first time in his long married life, Mr. Pedler saw himself as he really was. What a fool he

had been. By Heaven! He wasn't going to be one any more!

He went into the back room, and secured some guns and boxes of ammunition.

"James!" screeched his wife again, with terrified eyes. Dumbly, Annie clung to her.

"Shut up!" said Pedler savagely to her—as savagely as the good-natured Pedler knew how.

He handed her a rifle, and Annie another.

"Use 'em!" he said grimly.

Mrs. Pedler looked at the gun he had thrust into her hands, and burst into tears. Annie followed suit.

Together, he and Jimmy worked, piling up heavy furniture before doors and windows. When at last they had accomplished all that could be done, Pedler disappeared for a minute.

He returned, and made a calm statement.

"I just hung out the Stars and Stripes. Had a little one in my trunk." He paused for an instant. Then, "Those boys don't know what they're doin', when they fire on the Stars and Stripes," he asserted grimly.

CHAPTER XIII.

SIEGE.

ZACAPA'S men had finally reached the edge of the coffee *finca*.

There they halted and dismounted to gather in a group, much like a football team huddling about its quarterback to receive the signals for the next play.

Then on they came, advancing across the level ground in front of the house. Their rifles were held in a position of readiness, but as yet, none had fired a shot. The Central American bandit is averse to shooting, if his end can be gained otherwise.

The five in the house waited, their guns peeping through barricaded windows.

"Let 'em have it!" said Pedler steadily.

Five rifles spoke almost as one.

A rebel pitched forward on his face. Another screamed, and clutched his shoulder. The rest halted for an uncertain minute, and then they scattered to seek whatever shelter the yard offered.

All morning long a desultory fire was delivered upon the house. The defenders, knowing the need to husband their scanty ammunition, fired only when it was necessary to keep some bandit, more bolder than his fellows, from approaching nearer to the house.

Each one in the Pedler farm house had been assigned to a post. Pedler, himself, defended the back. His wife, one side; and Margarita, another. To Eddie had fallen the task of covering the front of the house.

Annie's father had taken her rifle away from her at an early stage of the siege. He had decided that it was worse than useless in the girl's violently trembling hands. Ammunition was too scarce to be thrown away needlessly. Every bullet had to be made give a good account of itself. So poor Annie was left all alone, lying on the middle of the floor, staring bewilderedly at Eddie. Somehow, she had conceived the idea that she would be safest with him.

Zacapa's men had made several concerted charges in the course of the morning. Thus far, they had always chosen to attack the house on one side only. They had not yet developed the courage necessary to split their forces and advance on all sides simultaneously.

Whenever such an attack began, all in the house rushed to the particular side in danger. Four repeating rifles, as splendid as money could buy, barked rapidly.

The defenders played their parts calmly, without apparent fear. Their voices were steady as they spoke to each other. But way back in their eyes,

there was a hopelessness, an unspoken dread. They knew that it was but a matter of time. If the ammunition did not give out before night, they realized that sunset would end their defense. Under cover of darkness, the attackers could reach the house, and overwhelm its few defenders.

"Too bad we ain't got a long distance telephone, ma," Pedler had once said soberly. "We could call up the nearest police station, an' have 'em come right over."

Tears, strange to Mrs. Pedler's eyes, began slowly to run down her cheeks. Home, back in the States, was far, far away. There, was safety. There, were long distance phones at her hand, to summon whatever assistance was needed.

But now they were as alone as though they were the only people in the world, except for the too-vigilant Central Americans outside. Help, in this strange, turbulent country, was as far away as the moon, and as hopeless to reach.

IT was high noon when Pedler made his disturbing announcement. He had been picking over the paste-board ammunition boxes piled on the floor.

"There ain't but a half a dozen bullets left here! Ma, do you know where there is any more?"

Mrs. Pedler shook her head dumbly.

"Gosh!" was all that Pedler said.

All five of them had come to the front room. Now, they stared at the six bright shells in the box Pedler was holding in his hand.

"Well," Mr. Pedler gulped something hard down in his throat. "Kinda looks bad, don't it?"

"I have four here," said Eddie, "besides what are in the chamber of my rifle."

"I have three!" announced Margarita.

Pedler turned an inquiring look to his wife.

"Four," she said, wearily.

Pedler's face was strained, as he took the six bullets from the box. He handed one to his wife, one to Margarita, and one to his daughter.

"For the end," he said significantly.

Mrs. Pedler got to her feet, and stumbled across to her husband.

"Jimmy," she cried brokenly, "Jimmy." And laid her thin, hard face on the shoulder of his coat. Tears, held in no restraint now, flowed unnoticed down her withered face.

It had been years since she had called him Jimmy! Pedler awkwardly stroked her iron gray hair.

"There, there," he said, as if he were soothing a child. "There, Maggie. It's goin' to be all right."

"I've been so mean to you!" she sobbed. "I didn't really mean it. I have just been so selfish."

Even in so tragic a situation, Pedler could not restrain the glint of triumph which came into his eyes. At last, Maggie had admitted, for once, that she had been wrong!

Eddie looked at Margarita. Her dear head was bent over her rifle. He went to her side, and placed his arm across her shoulders.

"Margarita," he murmured. "Whatever you are and whatever you've done, I want you to know before—before the end, that I love you."

She turned a tear-stained face to him.

"It is I," she cried passionately, "who have brought you to all this!"

"I don't care, Margarita," he said gently. "It has been worth it all, to know you."

Their lips met.

Annie, sitting on the floor by herself, was sobbing bitterly.

A sudden fusillade of shots galvanized them all into action.

"They're attacking this side of the house!" Pedler roared. "Let's make every shot count. They are our last!"

The defenders chose their targets with deliberation, and fired. They were

calm. Who cannot afford to be, when he knows that death is certain?

Suddenly, the volume of noise without grew louder and louder. Its tone had taken on a new note, that was like the spitting of many machine guns, like the roar of a high-powered motor boat on a distant lake. It rose and fell, now louder, now softer. Shrill cries from the attackers mingled with it.

Pedler was the first to grasp the significance.

"An airplane!" he shouted, leaping up from his knees. "A marine airplane! They's been one flyin' around this place twice this week already. Remember, ma?"

Pedler dashed across the room.

"God! If they'd only see us! Ma, where's a bedsheet?"

He tore out of the room. They heard him rushing up the stairs that led to the attic.

A minute later, he returned, the bedsheet hanging dejectedly by his side. In answer to their questioning looks, he sighed.

"Never seen me! They was flyin' too high. They're gone now."

The last-minute hope, which had flamed so promisingly in their hearts, died coldly. Without a word, they took their positions at the barricaded windows.

ZACAPA'S men, who had halted their attack upon the appearance of the airplane, now resumed it with redoubled vigor.

A leaden pellet splintered a board, and drove a sliver into Eddie's face. The warm blood started to stream down over his chin. Not seeming to notice the cut, Eddie wiped his chin with the back of his hand. His eye squinted along the sights of his rifle. He pressed the trigger. Nothing but a dead *click!* greeted his ears. With a curse he threw the gun from him.

Bolder and bolder now, at the decreasing fire of the defenders, the Nicaraguans were advancing slowly across

the yard, shooting as they came. One minute, another, and they would be on the veranda, smashing through the door.

Margarita's wide eyes were upon Eddie. She was slipping into her gun the cartridge Pedler had given her.

Suddenly, they heard that steady roar again. Louder and louder, until it became almost deafening. It was rushing straight for the house.

Then, the roar became punctuated by a sharper note. The rapping of a machine gun joined the din.

Peering over the edge of his window, Eddie saw a fearsome, but welcome sight.

An airplane, hardly a hundred feet off the ground, was roaring by. One helmeted figure, his huge, round goggles making him look like an avenging demon, was calmly directing the course of the plane. Another, seated in the forward cockpit, was spraying a leaden hail from a machine gun onto the disorganized Nicaraguans.

Reaching the end of the yard, the airplane zoomed upward, circled, and then, straight as an arrow dived for the ragged brown men fleeing in all directions. The figure behind the machine gun coolly waited until the airship was speeding along over the heads of the yelling soldiers.

Then he opened it up. Like snowmen in the sun, the Nicaraguans wilted to the ground.

Pedler was beside himself.

"Whee!" he cried, dancing a jig. "Look at 'em run! Golly, golly! Did you ever see the like!" Tears of joy, relief were coursing down his weather-beaten cheeks.

Soon the clearing was deserted, save for the crumpled bodies of those who had fought their last battle. The roar of the airplane was still audible, though it came from high up.

Led by Pedler, the five people pulled the table and chairs away from the door, and rushed from the house. Lazily circling about over their heads

was the airplane. Visible on the tail gleamed the bars of Uncle Sam—red, white and blue.

Pedler waved his arms, and shouted. As if their rescuers could hear!

A small brass cylinder struck the ground a few feet from where they stood. Picking it up, Eddie pulled the message from it.

Saw your colors through the glasses. Couldn't quite make out what everything was about, at first. Don't worry. We'll keep an eye on you until the rest of the bunch arrives. The advance guard of the first battalion—th Marines, will arrive at your place about sundown.

LIEUT. MAITWELL,
U. S. Marine Corps.

Pedler looked toward his house. From the attic window hung a small American flag.

"I knew it!" he said grimly. "Those boys didn't know what they were doin' when they fired on the Stars and Stripes."

CHAPTER XIV.

STRATEGY.

ABOUT the table in the dining room of the Pedler's home, a council of war was being held. The place seemed filled with lean, bronzed men in khaki. A few of the marine officers were gray-haired, wise in many campaigns. The most of them, however, were young, with fresh faces, eager to meet the enemy. Outside the house, five hundred marines were busily engaged in that all important occupation of the soldier, eating their "chow."

"You think you can lead us to this stronghold of Zacapa's?" the serious-eyed major asked Eddie.

"I can, sir. But, it will be a very difficult task to take it."

Briefly, he outlined the terrain about Zacapa's citadel.

"Hmm!" the major said, stroking his chin. "Hmm! If it is what you describe, it certainly will be hard to take,

Mr. Brooks. As we are traveling light, we have no seventy-fives with us. If we had them," he continued regretfully, "we would soon force the place to surrender, or else knock it off the face of the mountain."

"I doubt if seventy-fives would do you much good in this case, even if you had them, major." And Eddie told him of the difficulties of the approach up the steep mountainside, with its narrow path.

The major considered.

"I could send back for some mountain artillery," he mused, thinking aloud.

But that would cause delay—perhaps of weeks. They had been long enough on the trail of Zacapa, searching the jungles, the brush-covered plains, the mountains, and never finding him. The men were getting tired of it. Headquarters back in León was becoming unbearably impatient.

Yet, a frontal attack—the only attack possible, under the circumstances—would be doomed to failure even before it got started. Zacapa had been hard to find. Now that his hiding-place had been discovered, he would be just as hard to take. With the bridge that crossed the chasm down, fifty men could easily defend the place against a greatly superior enemy's most determined assaults. And Zacapa had considerably more than fifty men.

Various officers suggested different plans. After a moment's consideration, the major shook his head at each.

Lieutenant Maitwell, pilot of the airplane which had saved the Pedlers, Margarita, and Eddie, was younger than most in the room. He had a plan, a wild, and seemingly impossible one to be sure, but he thought that it could be made to work.

Gravely, the older officers listened to him. When he had finished, they sat in silence. Most glanced sidewise at the major, to see what he thought of such a crazy scheme.

"By Heaven!" said the major soft-

ly, the lights of adventure gleaming in his eyes. "Good lad, Maitwell; I believe it can be done!"

DAWN—gray, filled with shadows—began to awaken Zacapa's fort. Sounds of cooking, of the night's guard being relieved.

The sun suddenly thrust its broad, red face over the shoulder of the mountain. Breakfast was over, and the gates of the stockade were opened. Twenty little ragged men came out and took hold of the wooden bridge, which had lain by the walls of the stockade throughout the night.

Straining and grunting they bore it to the edge of the chasm, and up-ended it. While some held its base, others ran to the ropes which hung down from the end in the air.

Then, slowly, foot by foot, lest it gain too much momentum and get out of control, they lowered it across the chasm. Their morning task done, the men straggled back through the gates of the fort.

Women now began to cross the bridge. Each woman was leading a goat, which she took to the far end of the bridge, and released. These goats would pasture all day on the level plain. At sunset they would be taken in again, and milked.

It was a natural, peaceful scene. That morning was like any other morning. A little later, a group of men would leave, bent on some marauding errand of Zacapa's.

Little did the lazy sentry at the gate realize that the woods in the distance was ringed with hundreds of pairs of eyes. Little did Zacapa dream, as he raged at the survivors of yesterday's attack on the Pedler *finca*, that five hundred of the hated *gringos* had climbed the weary mountain way throughout most of the night, and now were at his very front door.

An indistinguishable drone, like that issuing from a great beehive, permeated the cool morning air. At first,

apparently, no one in the fort noticed it. Then men began to gather in groups, pointing upward at the speck in the sky.

Suddenly the indolent sentry at the gates nearly died of heart failure. He had seen a thin, khaki-clad line advancing at the double out of the woods. Goats ran about helter-skelter in their fright.

"*Los Americanos!*" screamed the sentry, discharging his piece in the air.

Instantly, the interior of the fort became a picture of confusion. Women grabbed children playing outside the doors of the huts, and ran crying indoors. Men rushed yelling through the street.

Soon, however, a semblance of order had been restored. Zacapa had been too wise not to have drilled his men in what to do in case of attack.

Machine guns along the walls of the stockade sprang into barking life. The line of marines hesitated visibly for an instant, and then pressed steadily onward.

"The bridge! The bridge!" A hundred voices along the walls took up the cry.

Fifty men rushed out of the gates in a disorganized mob. Feverishly, they began applying themselves to the task of removing the bridge. One tug. The weighty thing trembled.

General Zacapa, who had come to the walls, was not worried. There was plenty of time. One more pull, or, at the most, two more, would send the bridge crashing to the rock-strewn stream bed at the bottom of the chasm. Then, let the *Americanos* try to cross! While they were attempting to throw across a makeshift bridge, his machine guns would mow them down as a scythe cuts grain. Zacapa's thin lips parted in an unpleasant smile. The fools! They would try to capture him, Zacapa! He would wait until they had wasted themselves in their fruitless efforts to storm the place. Then he would sally forth, by means of

a bridge he had tucked away for just that very sort of occasion, and destroy them all. They would see!

It was Zacapa who saw it first.

He came out of his gloating thoughts and became cognizant of the great roaring noise overhead. He heard the burst of cheering from marine throats.

Lieutenant Maitwell drove his airplane straight for the fifty who were struggling with the bridge. So intent had they been with their task that they had not noticed him until he was almost on top of them.

Their hearts stood still. This great machine was rushing at them with the speed of the winds. A most terrifying, soul-racking noise assailed their ears. A machine gun, operated by a devil clad in leather, was spraying death into their midst.

In vain, Zacapa shouted at them: "The bridge, you fools! The bridge! One more pull and it will go!"

The men at the bridge huddled together in a frightened group. Then they broke, each man making for the gates of the stockade as fast as he could take himself.

And at their heels were snapping the bayonets of the marines!

EDDIE was with the first troops that swept through the gates of the fort. His blood was up. In bitter coin, and with usurious rate of interest, he was repaying these Liberals, these bandits, these rebels or whatever you might choose to call them, for the sufferings they had imposed on Margarita and himself.

The attack was swirling up the street. He stumbled. A great, six foot giant of a marine put out his hand, and steadied Eddie. An angelic grin was spread over the boyish face of the big fellow.

"Ain't it fun!" he shouted to Eddie. "Ain't had so much fun since all my fireworks went off one Fourth of July in ma's pantry!"

The big fellow suddenly broke off,

and dashed into a hut. He returned, a minute later, with two squealing brown men, a neck of each grasped in his mighty hands.

"These are mine!" he roared. "Ain't they cute!"

But Eddie could linger no longer. He had a personal account to settle.

He had entered the fort with the hope of finding Zacapa—before some playful marine nabbed him. Zacapa had a long account to pay, and the chief item on it was what he would have done to Margarita had she not escaped.

Eddie had a second mission. Margarita had said to him, before the marines pulled out from the Pedler farm:

"Look for the Blood of Morgan, Eddie. I have a feeling that it is in the fort. And especially, look out for the Mexican, Juan."

At last, Eddie reached the headquarters of Zacapa. He burst into the room where he and Margarita had been united again, and where Zacapa had told the strange story of the Blood of Morgan.

The room was empty. Only the red flag over the desk, leered at him from the corner.

Zacapa was gone!

A worry was beginning to settle down in Eddie's heart. If Zacapa escaped, then the mission of the marines was a failure. After all, the comparatively small number of ragged, ignorant brown men, most of them a mixture of Indian and negro, which Zacapa commanded, was not the greatest thorn in the side of the established government. Zacapa was the brains, the motivating power. Alone, he could flee to a new part of the country, set up his standard, and soon have as many men with him as before. The troubles, the weary hunt would begin all over again.

The secret path in back of the fort! Zacapa, seeing that defense was of no avail, would immediately flee to that path to escape.

With the fear that he was already too late, Eddie ran from the hut.

TWO men were running across the wide meadow in rear of the fort.

Occasionally they looked backward over their shoulders to see if they were being pursued. But no one, apparently, in that little village full of turmoil, had noticed them.

"Ah," cried Zacapa, as he ran, "it is fortunate that there is a path, my Juan! For you, as well as for me. If *los Americanos* had you in their possession, and knew that Juan, their scout, was Juan, a spy for General Zacapa—"

The general's unfinished sentence implied the dire things he meant.

"Will the path never be reached?" cried the Mexican in exasperation.

Zacapa looked over his shoulder again.

"They come!" he cried. "They have discovered us! Wait! No! Only one comes!"

The Mexican turned to look. An ejaculation of surprise left him.

"It is the Americano!" he said tensely to Zacapa. "The one who carried the satin slipper."

Zacapa almost halted in his surprise. Hate, mingled with a quickly formulated evil plan, showed on his lean features.

"More slowly, my good Juan!" he whispered. "Since he is alone, we shall let him catch up with us, if that is his desire."

Juan understood the purpose, and accordingly slackened his pace.

"Halt!" cried Eddie, coming up from behind. "Halt, General Zacapa! or I fire!"

Simulating surprise and chagrin, Zacapa and Juan faced the rifle of the American.

"It is a good thing, General Zacapa," said Eddie, "that I had occasion once to use the secret path in rear of the fort. You see, I have remembered it."

Zacapa shrugged his shoulders, but he did not take his keen, watchful eyes from Eddie's face.

"If you please," continued Eddie, "we will now go back to the fort."

Zacapa raised a hand.

"Wait, *mi amigo!* The *señorita*, she lost a valuable ruby from the heel of her slipper. You would like to find it, to give it to her? You would like very much to do this?"

Eddie did not trust them. Yet he had been told by Margarita that he might find the Blood of Morgan at the fort. By all means he would like to recover the stone, for it had, apparently, been lost while in his possession.

"What do you mean?" demanded Eddie, watching with narrowed eyes.

"Wait! I show you," replied Zacapa. His hand stole into the breast of his tunic.

The movement was natural. In fact, Eddie had been prepared to see him draw forth the precious ruby. So, in his watching the hand of General Zacapa, he had relaxed very slightly his vigilance over Juan.

That slight relaxation was enough to be Eddie's undoing. Swift as a striking snake, the Mexican had produced a knife from somewhere, and had hurled it at Eddie.

Involuntarily, Eddie ducked, and the knife whistled over his head. But as he ducked the muzzle of his rifle had come down. Before he could recover, Zacapa was upon him. In the general's hand, which he had now withdrawn from his blouse, was not the Blood of Morgan, but a sharp, glittering knife!

Eddie crashed to the ground, the slim, wiry Zacapa on top of him. Eddie's hand held the general's wrist suspended above him.

Fascinated, Eddie watched the dagger, gleaming in the hot sunlight, slowly pushing its way down, seeking his heart. The general's strength was prodigious, for such a small man.

With all his might, Eddie threw

every ounce of effort to keep that shiny blade from descending farther. There was an instant when the knife hung in mid-air, neither moving down nor back. Then Eddie's superior strength began to manifest itself. Slowly but inexorably, the general's wrist was being forced back away from Eddie's breast.

QUICKLY the Mexican Juan took a hand. He had no knife, as he had just now hurled it at Eddie, but he reached over and clutched Eddie's throat with his slim, brown hands.

Eddie's breath came in wheezing gasps. His face turned a deep red, and then was beginning to tinge on purple. The pressure about his neck became like ever-tightening iron bands. Dimly, out of his popping eyes, he could see the point of Zacapa's dagger descending lower and lower.

Suddenly he felt a heavy body strike the struggling mass of them. The knife dropped out of Zacapa's nerveless hands. The pressure about Eddie's neck ceased abruptly.

Amazed, he watched the face of the general above him. Supreme surprise, pain, horrified unbelief were written there.

Pushing the general easily from him, Eddie leaped to his feet. There, at the edge of the meadow, where it gave way suddenly to the almost perpendicular side of the mountain, were Juan and a heavy, squat Indian or negro.

Eddie dizzily recognized the newcomer. Pedro! Pedro, the ugly villain of the Southern Star! Pedro, who had tracked him relentlessly through the jungles of Nicaragua!

Eddie marveled at the man's coming to his rescue, as he thought.

A terrific battle was taking place at the edge of the descent. Pedro and the Mexican were locked in each other's embrace, each striving to cast the other down the mountainside.

Once, the Mexican almost was successful. He threw Pedro from him. Balancing himself right on the edge. Pedro looked as if he would go over at any second. But he recovered just in time to meet the rush of the Mexican, who was closing in on him to complete the job.

Eddie was still somewhat dizzy from the terrific choking he had received at the hands of Juan. His head, however, was clearing fast.

He saw Pedro rip the shirt from Juan's back as he struggled to catch a favorable hold. Then Eddie saw a little leather bag, bound to Juan's neck with a slender cord.

Understanding flashed instantly across his mind.

The Blood of Morgan!

He rushed forward to tear the bag from the Mexican's neck. He arrived not an instant too soon. In fact, he did not have to exert any strength to break the cord, for at that moment Pedro and Juan, locked in each other's embrace, swayed horribly for an instant and finally toppled over the edge, leaving the bag in Eddie's clutching hands.

Dumbly, Eddie turned to look at General Zacapa. The general was lying full length on the ground, his face to the earth. And, in the middle of his back was—the small, jewel-studded hilt of a dagger! Pedro had avenged the blow from the riding crop.

CHAPTER XV.

"FOREVER!"

THE lazy harbor of Corinto was gay with the riotous colors of the tropical vegetation which edged the shore. Far inland the indolent smoking cone of old Montombo could be seen looking down benignly upon the harbor.

Out upon a brilliantly blue sea, three American warships rode serenely at anchor. Near them was a commercial

steamer, which was to leave that afternoon.

A tall, straight youth, clad in a cool linen suit, and a beautiful, slender, dark-haired, dark-eyed girl dressed in simple white, strolled toward the dock. The steamer out in the harbor was going to carry the youth away.

"I had started to tell you the whole story of the Blood of Morgan that last night on the Southern Star," the girl was saying.

"Margarita," Eddie Brooks interrupted, "if you do not care to tell me about it, please don't! You know I trust you."

"I want to tell you!" she assured him. "The Blood of Morgan is safe now. Zacapa is dead, so there are no reasons for my not telling you. You see, the Conservatives needed money, a great deal of money. But, apparently, there was no means of getting any. My father, a stanch Conservative, offered the Blood of Morgan, which has been in our family for generations. My uncle and I went to the United States to dispose of it. My father had demurred, at first, at my going. He knew that if jewel thieves got wind of it there would be danger. He assented to my going, however, when I proved to him that my being with uncle would do a great deal to allay suspicion. Indeed, the heel of a woman's slipper is the best place in the world to hide a precious jewel, especially if she wears the slipper constantly.

"My uncle and I were unable to dispose of the ruby. Collectors, jewelers, everybody, said that it was too big, and would cost too much. So, there was nothing for us to do but to return to Nicaragua. While we were in New York a friend of uncle's placed at our disposal, his limousine and his chauffeur. One time, in getting out of the car, I slipped and caught my heel. I thought that the heel had been torn loose from the slipper, revealing the hiding place of the jewel. My actions

must have disclosed my thoughts, for I noticed the chauffeur looking at me very peculiarly. However, the heel had not come off, and so I dismissed my uneasiness. The chauffeur had not seen it, and I did not dream that he knew of the existence of the Blood of Morgan.

"Then came the night we were to take the boat for Nicaragua. When we reached the dark street where you found us, the chauffeur suddenly stopped the car, and demanded that we give him the Blood of Morgan. Of course my uncle refused. The chauffeur attacked my uncle with a monkey-wrench he had hidden in the seat beside him. I started to scream, when two terrible-looking men opened the door of the car and reached in for me. That was all I knew until I found your face looking down upon me."

"But how do you account for the fact that your chauffeur was killed?" interrupted Eddie. "If the two men who entered the car had been his partners, they would not be likely to do it. Your uncle could not have done it, as he was unconscious."

"PEDRO killed him," she explained.

"Pedro!"

"Yes. Poor Pedro. He was one of the three men Zacapa sent to the United States to get the Blood of Morgan. But Zacapa did not know that Pedro was a secret agent of my father's. Just as Juan was a spy for Zacapa. I didn't know myself that the ugly Pedro was a friend until my father told me, only yesterday."

Eddie was doing his best to follow this involved Central American intrigue.

"Hold on a minute!" he objected. "Just how did Zacapa get into all this?"

"Zacapa had spies everywhere. Somehow news leaked out of the purpose of our visit to the United States. Zacapa, too, needed money. Rifles and

bullets are expensive. So he sent Pedro, Felipe, and Roberto to the United States to obtain possession of the ruby. Felipe became the chauffeur. Pedro and Roberto were the two who attacked the limousine. I do not know how exactly Pedro came to kill Felipe. I imagine Felipe was about to tell his associates to look in the heel of my slipper. Pedro did not want that. He was there to protect the ruby. And, in the confusion, he slipped a knife into Felipe.

"Roberto could not find the jewel. After you came along, and took me so unwittingly to the ship, Roberto and Pedro followed. Roberto was sure that I carried the Blood of Morgan with me, but where he did not know. Always it has been Pedro who was watching out for the Blood of Morgan. It was he who killed Roberto on the ship. He feared that Roberto was going to get the stone from you. It was also he who killed the bushmaster in the jungle. You were carrying the ruby, you see. He transferred his allegiance from me to you."

"That is odd!" Eddie exclaimed. "I should think that he would have watched out for the daughter of his employer, letting the ruby go."

"That shows how much you know about Central American temperament!" she laughed. "The Central American is very chivalrous to women, it is true. But, women do not matter so much to him when politics or a precious thing like the Blood of Morgan

is involved. Pedro believed that his first duty was to the stone."

"But how about the three daggers? They looked like the same one all the time."

"That, too," she said, "is because of the Central American temperament. Perhaps Pedro's ugly personal looks made him buy sets of daggers that were pretty as well as useful. A man like Pedro takes great pride in his stock of knives, just as your cowboys take pride in their pistols."

"How did Juan finally gain control of the ruby?" wondered Eddie.

"Easily enough, since he was a spy in the American camp. Zacapa had already warned him to be on the lookout for you and the Blood of Morgan. When they brought you to the hospital, Juan stole the stone while you tossed in fever. The desire to possess it himself made him omit to give it to Zacapa."

"And lastly, Señorita Rivera, you who once told me that your name was different, why did you give me the satin slipper in the first place and drag me into all this?"

"Because—I was afraid. You looked so kind and strong. I thought if you kept it for me, they would not know who had it, and I intended to keep away from you, so as not to arouse suspicion—but that, Señor Brooks, I was unable to do."

"Forever?" he asked suddenly, placing his arm about her.

"Forever!" she replied, starry eyes shining up to his.

THE END.

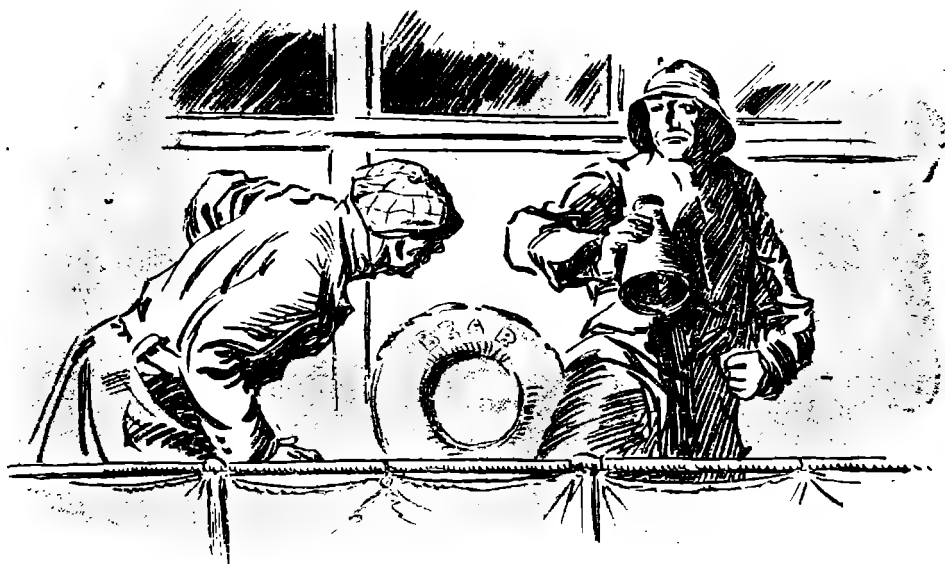
Another Hopper Story

Issue of March 16th

A BALE OF TROUBLE

*In which an army officer finds difficulties galore
in supposedly peaceful New York*

By LIEUTENANT JOHN HOPPER



"You crazy!" the Italian jabbered. "Head back out!"

Heritage of the Sea

*Fog blinded the captains of the vessels on Long Island Sound
—blinded them to everything but honor*

By CAPT. W. R. BETHEL

IN the exact center of the bridge of the lightless vessel, the lanky captain leaned far out over the dripping weather apron and listened tensely into the murky darkness of Long Island Sound. Astern and to the starboard, the Montauk bell buoy tolled faintly as it was left behind. Far off to the right the distant clanging of other buoys came from the Connecticut shore.

"Gr-r-r-r-unh!" a bass whistle grunted up ahead. That would be the Fall River boat.

"Gr-r-r-r-unh!" again she grunted, dead ahead.

The captain whirled his head and spoke in a hoarse whisper to the man at the wheel.

"Port a bit, Sims!"

"Aye, sir!"

The slowly moving rum-runner

veered slightly as she answered the suppressed rattle of the steering engine in the bowels of the ship.

The harsh chuffing of the Fall River boat began to cough closer, and in a moment her fog-veiled lights hove into view to the starboard.

"Gr-r-r-r-unh!" her fog horn blared as she churned eastward at half speed toward the open Atlantic. From along the black side of the rum-runner came the slosh and sucking of the wave the big steamer had raised, and the smaller vessel rose and fell softly upon it for an instant as it crept along.

"Hoo-o-o-o-oo!" That would be the Boston turbine.

"Starboard a hair, Sims!"

"Starboard, sir!"

"Hoo-o-o-o-oo!"

A dripping gray shape with phos-

phorescent rows of dim lights along her decks forged by, high over the port rail.

"*Wh-a-a-a-h!*" a seagoing tug spoke astern, and in a moment she wallowed by out of sight on the port side.

Here and there all over the Sound, vessels were blaring and tooting their warnings and giving their answers as they forged up and down the channel and crossed between Connecticut and the Long Island shore.

The rum-runner's captain craned farther out and strained his ears as he exactly placed the nearest of them. The dank fog was congealing on his oilskins and dripping from his face. He straightened up and groped for the speaking tube. Thrusting it to his lips he growled a terse order to the man deep below in the engine room.

"Give me half speed, chief, until I change it!"

He clanked the tube back on its hook and as he craned out again the ship began to vibrate gently to the increased throttle.

A man who had been standing silently in the starboard wing clutched the bridge rail and groped over beside the captain.

"You no thinka you go too fast now, cap, hey?"

His hand tugged at the captain's oilskin sleeve as he voiced the question.

The captain whirled his head and peered back over his shoulder at the unseen speaker.

"What the hell's biting you now, Joe?" he growled.

The questioner prefaced his words with a chuckle, but there was panic and hysteria in it.

"I no lika this fog too moch. Too moch traffic in dam Sound thisa night. You no thinka we run too fast, cap?"

THE captain shoved himself erect. "Feet gettin' cold, huh? Well, this is just our sort of weather, Joe. We'll slide to Oldfield Point under cover of the fog, slip the stuff to

your men at the landing, and then we'll turn tail and hop out again. The chasers 'll be wondering whatinell happened this time. This is our eighth trip in together. I'm another thousand to the good and you're another hundred thousand. I never see you get scared before. What are you kicking about?"

"I no feela right, cap! I have hoonch this time not so good! Listen, cap, you no think we better back up and get back out for less foggy time?"

Up ahead two big fog horns blared. A long, lean tanker loomed out of the murk and grazed by.

"Aw, damn it, Joe, shut up! Get to hell away from me! How can I con this ship with your bazoo going? Scat! Get over where you was and make a noise like a mouse!"

"Leesten, cap!" Hysteria was making the Italian's voice tremble reedily. "You better swing round and put back out! I got two hunderd t'ousand dollars' wort' on board here. I lose that an' my guarantee on thisa vessel, see?"

"Aw! Go back where you was, I told ye!"

He gave the scared Italian a shove away from him.

Joe Parento shuffled back along the rail and whined his woes to himself as he peered, listening desperately, into murk from the starboard wing. The fog had constantly thickened, and he dodged back as a huge black tramp wallowed by so close he could almost have reached out and touched it.

"For Heaven's sake, cap!" He scrambled over and again tugged at the captain's sleeve.

"Get to hell away, Joe! You're yellow as a Chink! I haven't lost a dime yet for you and I've made you a million while I was makin' seven grand for myself. What's got you scared of a little hatful of fog?"

He groped for the speaking tube.

"Give her another twenty revolutions, chief," his tense growl spoke down the tube.

"*Per Dio!*" swore the Italian. "You get crazy lika the hell!"

"Sh! Listen!"

The captain craned out again.

"*Wh-a-a-a-h! Whuh! Whuh! Whuh!*"

The captain chuckled.

"That's the Bridgeport-Port Jeff ferry! He's divin' over, and he's makin' it! Bully for him, and I'm glad he's out of our way!"

Two big fog horns began booming, in question and answer, off to the port quarter ahead.

"Them big fellows are gettin' worried," he growled half to himself, "gettin' close together and neither one knows just where t'other one is exactly!"

"*Hoo-o-o-o-oooh! Hoo! Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!*"

"*Gr-r-r-r-unh! Grr! Grr!*"

In a moment came a long blast followed at an interval by two short grunts.

"By Godfrey, that was a close shave for 'em!" enthused the captain of the rum-runner, *sotto voce*.

He spoke into the speaking tube.

"Cut her to half throttle, chief!" he murmured.

He felt the Italian's hand trembling on his sleeve.

"You no thinka we better turna back, cap? I have hoonch thisa time we have trooble, hey, what you theenk?"

The captain grabbed the quivering hand on his sleeve and with his caloused clutch he firmly tore the hand away.

"You give me the heebie-jeebies, Joe! Whyn't you be reasonable? What 're you askeard of?"

SOMETHING up ahead caught his ear and he half crawled out on the weather apron.

"There's some damned thing up ahead of us goin' our way with no lights either! She ain't a hundred fathoms ahead of us!" he blurted as

he crawled back. He put the mouth-piece of the tube to his lips.

"Hey, chief! Cut her to about forty revolutions and stand by! May need full speed astern any moment!"

He spoke in a tense whisper to the man at the wheel.

"Port a bit, Sims! Steady as you go!"

"Steady, sir!"

The captain started to stretch out over the apron again and a rasping sound from up ahead caused him to pause, tensely listening. A big siren and a hoarse whistle blared at the same instant. A terrific smashing, grinding crash leaped to a crescendo of harsh noise. Excited voices shrilled across the water.

The rum boat captain's voice rose to an excited snarl.

"They've met head on! It's this feller ahead of us and somepin. It's one of them big fellers that's got him! He's either a booze boat like us or he's a chaser!"

The Italian was sniveling.

"Cap, you turn back, cap, you hear me?"

The captain gave him a shove that sent him scurrying to the end of the bridge. From up ahead came the jangle of ship's bells and the sharp coughs of the exhausts.

"Hell's bells! The big fellow's rammed 'em and he's runnin' off to leave 'em drown!"

The lights of the oncoming steamer loomed out of the fog and bore down on them, scraped along the side and moved by. The bootleg captain snatched up a flash light and snapped it on as he dashed to the wing, and he roughly elbowed the Italian aside as he thrust it upward to peer at the vessel. Scared yellow faces blinked down at him from along the rail.

"You yellow devils!" the captain shrilled up at them. "What you runnin' off for after ramming a vessel?"

He glimpsed the word "*Maru*" on the stern of the tramp as she surged by

with engines pounding full speed ahead.

He leaped to the speaking tube.

"Shut her down, chief, and let her drift! Somebody rammed up ahead. Don't want to smash into one of their boats or run down anybody swimmin'. Stand tight by the tube, too! I may want to use the engine quick at any time!"

His words leaped down the tube like pistol shots. He snatched the megaphone down and whirling, shouted down to the deck.

"Snap on the lights, mister!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

The metal switch-box door clanged open as the thudding feet of the mate reached it and his hand clawed it open. Globes of light sprang out along the foggy deck and up in the wheelhouse.

The captain bawled down the tube: "All right, chief! Hold her there! Watch the indicator!"

A bell clanged harshly as he rammed the telltale over to "Stop."

"Man the boats! Get them hooks and life-rings out! Snap to it, mister! Snap them carriages into it!" His voice was bawling through the short megaphone. He sprawled out upon the weather apron and bawled ahead.

"Ahoy, out there! Ahoy!" his voice roared and quavered.

FAINTLY through the fog came: "Ahoy! Ahoy! This way!"

He sprang back into the bridge and grabbed wildly for the whistle cord and the black steamer's hoarse whistle began to roar staccato blasts which echoed and reechoed into the night. Men were racing about the deck to the sharp commands of the mate, which were punctuated by thudding fists and heavy boot toes.

Port and starboard davits creaked outward, and the ropes whined in the sheaves as the lifeboats raced down and crashed into the water. The gangplank clattered to the water's edge. The mate ran down it and began to

bawl through his megaphone. Up overhead the big whistle was still booming.

Up on the bridge Joe Parento, the bootleg king, was gaping open-mouthed at the lanky captain, whose long arm was still yanking the whistle cord.

"You stoppa that! You heara me? You quit it? You gone *lunatico*? What's matter you, cap? Cut it out, now!"

He leaped forward and seized the captain's arm with both his own and dragged it down.

"I'm goin' to stand by, Joe! They's men drowndin' out thar ef we don't help 'em!"

"Stand by lika the hell!" the Italian jabbered. "You craze! Swing 'round! Head back out! You hear me, hey?"

He groped in the pocket of his coat and came out with a snub-nosed automatic.

"Turn her 'round, cap, and don't waste no time, or I blow you to hell!"

His voice was a yelping scream.

The captain sprang toward him with clenched fist and arm doubled back, ready to strike. A lurid flame burst forth from the blunt muzzle of the pistol and searing pain jabbed at the left shoulder of the seaman.

"Drop the gun, wop!"

His clenched fist smashed down and the gun exploded in mid-air as it dropped toward the floor. The sturdy sea-muscle arm lashed upward and the blocky fist crunched under Parento's chin, lifting him upward from the floor and propelling him backward. He fell on his back with a thud. The captain snatched up the fallen pistol and thrust it into the pocket of his sou'wester.

The lifeboats were thumping against the vessel's side and grating along as the rifferaff crew returned with the swimmers they had rescued. The captain picked up the unconscious body of the Italian bootleg king and strode down the bridge stairs with it under

his right arm. A patch of blood was already oozing out from the burning hole in his left shoulder, painting the yellow oilskin crimson.

He deposited his unconscious burden upon the deck underneath an electric light. Walking to the head of the gangplank, he bent to peer downward, where dripping figures were climbing from the boats upon the landing platform of the gangplank and starting up toward the deck.

At the head of the line was a man in a blue uniform, and as he stepped upon the deck he snorted with astonishment, for the menacing figure of the captain shot out a long arm with a stubby automatic gripped in his huge fist.

"I'm grabbing for the sky, skipper!" the uniformed man chuckled, stretching both his hands high overhead.

"What vessel?" snarled the oilskin-clad figure.

"Coast Guard cutter Quadras. We were laying without lights for the rum-runner Bear, from St. John, when we got rammed by a Jap tramp who went on and left us."

THE blunt nose of the automatic whipped toward the face of the next gaping man who stepped on the deck.

"Hands up! Get 'em up, I said, damn you!"

The gaunt skipper stepped to the side of the Coast Guard commander and tapped the back of his coat with the back of his left hand. Finding no hidden weapons, he thrust the pistol muzzle into the face of the dumfounded seaman, who had frozen in his tracks at the top of the gangplank.

"I ain't got no gun, cap!" the man blurted.

"Step ahead, then, you're blocking traffic!"

One by one the others filed up and ranged along the deck, grinning sheepishly, their hands uplifted.

The Coast Guard commander turned to confront him.

"I give you my word, sir, neither my men nor myself will commit an overt act. We're too glad to be picked up, no matter who you may be."

The skipper smiled grimly as he thrust the automatic into his pocket.

"At your ease, men. Your arms might get stiff from keepin' 'em up so long. I hate to do it, but I'm in honor bound to protect my cargo. This is the rum-runner Bear, with two hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of Canadian Club."

The Coast Guard commander slapped his wet thigh and laughed heartily.

"That's pretty rich!"

A roar went up from the line of men, glad to enjoy a joke on themselves.

Several of the rum vessel's crew came stalking up the gangplank, with guns and knives gleaming in their hands, only to thrust them out of sight and join in the laughter. Down on the landing platform the mate was bawling to the men he had sent to scull the boats to the davit falls.

In a moment he came up, scowling, only to grin as he saw the good nature of all hands. With a wave of his arm he sent men to the davits, and in a few minutes the boats came bobbing up and were swung-onto the deck and made fast.

Joe Parento crawled to his feet and came stumbling toward the group on the deck with his hand nursing his bruised jaw. He gaped dazedly about into the grinning faces. He gasped with fright as his eyes rested on the blotch of blood which had oozed from the captain's left shoulder and stained his oilskins.

"I no go for to shoot you, cap, honest!" he denied.

"Shut up!" the skipper roared. "Here's your gun! Better toss it over the side, or you'll get into real trouble with it."

He flung the gun to the Italian, who caught it and threw it over the rail into the water.

"Is everything snug, mister?" the skipper bawled to the mate.

"Shipshape and Bristol fashion, sir!" the mate answered as he came to the skipper's side.

"Break out dry clothes for these sailors and find places for 'em to sleep. Break out a half dozen quarts of whisky and give 'em a nip. They've been wet and might catch cold."

He spoke kindly to the captured commander.

"If you'll come with me, sir, I'll show you your quarters up alongside my own, and some dry clothes, and some real stuff, if you'll have it. We'll be back at the twelve-mile line in an hour or so, and you can wireless from one of the boats in the row for a cutter to come after you and your men."

As they walked by the switch-box he reached in and snapped off the lights. His flash light glowed for a moment as he opened the door of a cabin and ushered the rescued officer inside. Walking to his own room, he

came out with an armful of clothing and handed them to the commander, telling him to don them in the dark. Then he lurched to the ladder and climbed the bridge.

"Half speed, chief, stand by for full!" he growled down the tube. He swayed back and forth dizzily as his head swam from weakness and gnawing pain in his left shoulder. The scuff of the Coast Guard commander's shoes sounded as he climbed the steps and groped along the bridge. His arm ran around the sagging waist of the skipper.

"Better come on down and rest awhile yourself, sir," he suggested. "I'm fresh, and I know this Sound as well as you do. I'll con the old tub out and deliver her in Rum Row."

He supported the faltering steps of the old man down the steps and along to his stateroom, and then raced back to the bridge. Half crawling out on the weather apron, he peered and listened into the impenetrable murk. The black ship swung slowly around to his orders and began to forge up the Sound out toward the open sea.

THE END



The Vampire Bat

THE vampire bat, feared by natives and dreaded by travelers, flourishes best in the thick forests of Ecuador, but is also found in the Philippine Islands and in Borneo. It is often confounded with the flying squirrel, which shares its forest solitudes, and for a long time it was regarded as a myth.

But a brief visit to any of the places it inhabits and a talk with any of the natives will soon convince the most skeptical that such a creature really haunts the tropic night. A naturalist collecting specimens of the wild life of Ecuador offered a cash prize for every vampire bat, dead or alive, and for several months no one claimed the money. Then a native appeared with two skins, one silvery-gray and one a rich, reddish-brown, fine and silky, like moleskin.

The naturalist doubled the reward for a live bat, but no one succeeded in capturing one alive, their extreme shyness, nocturnal habits and the superstitious terror they inspire in the natives making it almost impossible to get a live specimen.

Minna Irving.



"You couldn't buy me with all the money in the world!" she told him furiously

The Way of the West

A roamer of the rangeland, Wanderin' Willie Watson finds more than enough excitement around the Bar-X ranch, trying to recover Sally Corbin's gold

By A. T. LOCKE

Author of "Will Power in Packsaddle," "Case One Hundred and One," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

SALLY LEE CORBIN is riding home to the Bar-X ranch with her old grandfather, Dan Corbin, after an unsuccessful attempt to get Banker Pinkham, of Wallow, to renew their mortgage. Suddenly her grandfather is killed from ambush. Foreman Buck Randall and the Bar-X punchers ride out, but can find no trace of the murderer. Sally Lee offers a reward of ten thousand dollars in gold—practically every cent she has left.

She is in Wallow, urging old Sheriff Dumbarton to greater efforts, when an armed man, Blackie Dunham, brings

in a prisoner, and claims the reward. The other man, Wanderin' Willie Watson, does not deny his guilt until Dunham had ridden off with the money; then he says that Dunham had a gun on him all the time; and that he had been in jail in Dorado when Corbin was shot.

None of the Wallow people believe his story, except Sally. That night a mob tries to lynch Willie, and sets fire to the jail. Sally and the sheriff give him a chance to escape, and he rides ahead of the mob to Dorado, where the sheriff, "Easy" Pickins, verifies

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his alibi. But Willie has recognized Dunham as a prisoner in the jail; and the mob is about to lynch Dunham. Blackie stubbornly refuses to disclose where he has hidden Sally's gold, although he admits killing Corbin with this scheme in mind. Willie and Randall prevent the lynching, hoping to trick Dunham into betraying the hiding place through a scheme Willie has worked out, and they take him to Sheriff Dumbarton's jail, at Wallow.

Although Willie, the wanderer, had told Sally Lee he was on his way—when he had thought the murderer was caught and the gold was about to be recovered—he now comes back, to help find her money. But in the sheriff's office, Banker Pinkham sarcastically charges that Willie is simply scherring to get the blood money himself. Leaping on a chair, Wanderin' Willie gets the drop on Pinkham.

CHAPTER X (*Continued*).

SHOW-DOWN.

PINKHAM held up his hands and gulped a couple of times; his face, under the dim yellow glow of the lamp, was ghastly white.

"I take back the words," he said in a weak voice. "I take it back," he repeated hastily.

"I've had enough of yo' and yore talk!" exclaimed Wanderin' Willie. "I'm a reasonable fellow, as I said before, and I ain't lookin' fer no quarrel with yo' or no one else. But neither yo' nor no one else kin go too far with me. Blood money!" he growled. "I reckon yo' know more about blood money than I do, yo' mortgage-foreclosin' rattler! Now git! And git quick, before my trigger fingers slip and yore soul goes kitin' down to hell whar it belongs!"

Pinkham, being a man of judgment who played safe in the game of life, opened the door and vanished from the room.

Wanderin' Willie, from his place of vantage on the chair, looked over the rough assembly.

"Is thar any one else hyar who thinks thet I'm tryin' to collect any blood money?" he asked belligerently. Pinkham's insinuation had, for a moment, made him see red and his mind still was aflame. "I reckon thar isn't," he continued when each and every man in the room remained silent. "All I'm aimin' to do," he explained in a milder tone of voice, "is to git thet ten thousand dollars back fer Miss Corbin. And I'll git it, too; yo'-all kin bet yore stacks on thet!"

He slipped his guns back into his holster and stepped down to the floor again, his face still stern and menacing.

"I reckon yo're all right, son," said Sheriff Dumbarton, breaking the silence. "I don't know's I blame yo' fer takin' exception to the remarks made by Pinkham."

"Did yo' see Pinkham's face when he was peerin' into them two guns?" chuckled one of the men. "He looked like he was seein' a herd of pink elephants."

Several of the men in the room laughed at their recollection of the banker's discomfiture. Pinkham, because of his arrogance, was far from popular in Wallow.

Sally Corbin, despite her Western breeding, had been terribly unnerved by the dispute which had arisen so suddenly and which, for a few minutes at least, had promised grave consequences. Then, too, it had made her realize for the first time that because of his capture of Blackie Dunham, she was under obligation to pay ten thousand dollars to Wanderin' Willie. She had not only lost ten thousand dollars in the event that the secret of Blackie's cache was not revealed, but she would owe ten thousand dollars more to his captor. She wondered, vaguely, how she had happened to overlook this obvious fact. Wanderin' Willie, of course, had asserted that he would not

take the money, but still she was obligated. She felt suddenly tired and depressed and she wished that she were back at her hotel and in her bed.

"Take me back to the hotel, please," she whispered to Buck, who was standing beside her.

"Of co'se, honey," he said. "Yo' must be tired, and I never thought of it."

She said good night to those in the office, and for a moment her eyes met those of Wanderin' Willie.

Then she was out on the street with Buck Randall and they were walking up toward the hotel together.

"Pinkham didn't lose any time makin' tracks fer home," laughed Randall as he observed that two or three of the third-story windows of the hotel were lighted. "Thet little experience may tone 'im down a bit. He's been ridin' every one with spurs fer the last few months."

Sally Lee did not make any comment because she felt too depressed and too tired to talk.

"Cheer up, Sally," said Randall, sensing her state of mind. "Yo'll have the money back in th' shake of a lamb's tail. It's a clever scheme we've got."

"Don't tell me to-night, Buck," pleaded Sally. "I'm too weary to listen, that's all."

So they walked in silence up to the hotel and, in the shadow of the veranda, Randall tried to detain her for a moment. He attempted to put his arm around her, but she evaded the caress. Her mood disturbed and annoyed him and he voiced his dissatisfaction rather impatiently.

"What's the matter, Sally?" he asked. "Aren't yo' goin' to kiss me good night?"

"Not to-night, Buck," she told him. "I just don't feel like it."

"Sally, please," he pleaded.

"No," she replied positively, and then she slipped into the door of the hotel and closed it softly behind her.

Randall stood there for a moment with a furrowed brow and angry eyes. Then, shrugging his shoulders, he tramped down the veranda and started back in the direction of the sheriff's office. As he walked down the street he looked back at the hotel and he saw that the rooms occupied by Pinkham were still illuminated. He did not know, however, that the banker, burning with anger, was pacing restlessly up and down his living room. The man's countenance was flushed with rage and humiliation and his fists were tightly clenched. Pinkham, for some years, had been the unobtrusive but powerful ruler of Wallow and he had so conducted himself that his authority had never before been questioned in the community.

Now he had been publicly defied by a man of half his age, a fellow who appeared to be little more than a worthless drifter.

Pinkham fairly trembled with indignation as he visualized the scene that had taken place only a few moments before in the office of the sheriff. He knew that he had cut a pitiable figure in the affair. He knew, too, that the sympathy of the people in the office had not been with him and he felt that, after he had left the place, he had been derided and laughed at. And Sally Lee Corbin had been one of the witnesses of the incident that was so discreditable to himself. This, too, after the manner in which he had talked to her when they had been walking from the hotel to the office of the sheriff.

It occurred to him that one of the first things his daughter would hear after her arrival in Wallow would be the story of his defeat at the hands of an ignorant and worthless young hobo. The very thought of this was intolerable because Penelope was the only living person for whom Pinkham had any real love. He had more than ordinary affection for his daughter; he was her abject slave. Ever since she had been a little girl her wishes, to him,

had been equivalent to commands. He had lived for her, toiled for her, and accumulated his wealth for her. For the past few years, while she had been at school in the East, he had sorely missed her companionship.

Now she was through with her schooling, and he had been anticipating her return to Wallow to remain with him for, at least, a little while. For some time past he had been glad to see the close of each day; each evening brought Penelope closer to him. He wanted her to live again in the West and to come to like the country with the passion that he had come to feel for it. For a long time he had been planning to establish one of those little empires which are only possible in the far stretches of the West. He would become a cattle king, and Penelope would be the princess of his domain. Much land already had slipped into his control and more was coming, after certain mortgages had been foreclosed.

He had conducted his campaign in the past in a shrewd and quiet manner and, while he had arrogated power to himself, he had not made any particular display of it. Now the time had come, he thought somewhat bitterly, to use the mailed fist instead of the gloved hand in pursuit of his ambitions. He had been defied in his own territory by a presumptuous young fool, and, worse than that, many of those who were indebted to him had failed to raise a finger or a voice in his behalf.

Well, so much the worse for the young fool, and so much the worse for those to whom, in the past, he had shown a certain wise leniency. From now on he would wage a ruthless warfare to gain his ends; if ever he had had scruples, he would abandon them; if he had accorded mercy, he would accord it no longer. It would not be long before he would be the undisputed king of the district and—

He heard, through the thin floor, the sound of some one moving lightly around in the room beneath him.

—And as king he would have a consort, a young queen worthy of any homage that might be bestowed on her.

CHAPTER XI.

ESCAPE?

BLACKIE DUNHAM, as near as he could estimate, had spent a night and a day in the dark confines of the Wallow jail. In the course of that time he had had only one meal which, he had been given to understand, had been his breakfast. That had been many hours before, and he had eaten it after having spent a night of restless self-torture.

Blackie was, at heart, a coward and, like most of his ilk, he had rather a vivid imagination. He also was decidedly stubborn and, the night before, he had determined to die rather than to expose the location of the cache in which he had hidden the ten thousand dollars in gold. He had taken that attitude because he had known very well that, once the gold was recovered, he would be hung anyway. No man, no matter what oath he might have sworn by, could have convinced him otherwise.

He had not been trying to bluff Randall and the other members of the posse when he had asserted that if he were put to death they never would find the gold. He had been in dead earnest, even with the rope around his neck, and nothing, during that crisis, would have induced him to reveal his secret. It had been, however, a hideous situation and every time he thought of it in the darkness of his cell the perspiration came to his forehead. He thought of it frequently, too, for the very uncertainty of what each moment might bring was rapidly undermining his morale. It was as dark as night in his cell; he could not see his hand before his face. It was quiet, too; uncannily quiet.

When he had been definitely con-

fronted with death and, in a way, fighting material things, he had summoned all of his scanty courage to his aid. It had won him a reprieve. But now left to his own imagination in his prison, he felt infinitely more frightened and terrified than when, with a rope around his neck, he had listened to Buck Randall counting ten—when he had waited for the jerk of the hemp that would send him into eternity.

He started nervously as the outer door of the room opened and a gleam of lamplight streamed into the crude place of confinement. He shrank to the rear of the place and, with dilated eyes, looked toward the door. Had they decided, after all, to take him out and hang him? Were they going to wreak vengeance on him at the cost of ten thousand dollars in gold?

Maybe not, because there seemed to be only one man standing beyond the bars in the lighted doorway. Blackie had no trouble in identifying the silhouetted figure as that of old Sheriff Dumbarton. But still Blackie did not step forward, rather he huddled farther back in a corner of the room, a corner that was not touched by the stream of yellow light that came through the iron door and cast a barred shadow on the floor.

"Dunham!" he heard the voice of the sheriff call. "If yo' want yore supper, come and git it!"

"Yes, sir," said Blackie, mingling the words with a sigh of relief.

Dumbarton, without opening the door of the cell, slipped half a loaf of bread and a chunk of roast beef through the bars. Blackie took it with trembling fingers. He was hungry, after his fast of many hours, but for a moment he ignored the food. Through the cell door he could look into the front office of the sheriff's quarters, and he could see that there were a number of men in there who seemed to be engaged in a serious conversation.

"Say, sheriff," he whispered, and

there was terror in his voice, "what are yo' aimin' to do with me?"

"Cain't say," the sheriff replied brusquely. "The boys are confabbin' now out in the office. Whatever they say goes, too. Yo're a damn rattler, and whatever they want to do with yo' is all right with me!"

"But, sheriff," whined Blackie, "yo're sworn to uphold the law. Yo' gotta keep me in jail and see thet I git justice. Yo' can't turn me over to thet pack of wolves out thar."

"I cain't, huh?" grinned the sheriff. "Say, bo, yo'll see if I cain't when the time comes thet they want yo'. Yo'll git justice, all right, no matter what they do to yo'."

"Aw, sheriff," Blackie wailed, "be a good feller and—"

But the heavy wooden door outside the iron cell-door slammed in Blackie's face, and he was plunged into darkness again, there to await his fate.

HE paced back and forth in the darkness, fearful that each moment might bring him a summons to go out to his death. He still held to his determination, however, not to reveal the location of the gold.

If he had enough time he might escape. If there was only some way, he thought, that he could get word to some of his boon companions down along the headwaters of the Smoky Hill River, back in Kansas. For Blackie Dunham, as a result of a little clash with the law down there, had drifted north to lie low for awhile. He had planned to remain away for a few months before going back and joining the gang of rustlers and horse thieves whose operations had been inspired and directed to a great extent by himself.

And now, it seemed, he never would have another glimpse of the rolling plains of Kansas; he never would mingle with his friends again, and, unless by the merest chance, they never would know what had become of him.

He examined the walls of his prison as thoroughly as he could in the darkness, and he soon found out that they were constructed of squared logs. He realized at once that it would be almost impossible for him to make his escape.

If he had a small saw, or even a knife, he could at least make an attempt to cut his way out; given time enough, he might even succeed. But he had neither of these implements—nothing, in fact, to work with.

A couple of hours passed by. Once more the outer door of his jail opened. A feeling of panic took possession of him because, framed in the lighted rectangle, he saw the sheriff and several of those who had been members of the posse. His heart commenced to palpitate violently, his breath came faster, and he felt his knees weakening.

"Come over here, Dunham!" shouted the sheriff through the bars of the iron door.

Blackie shuffled forward, feeling slightly relieved because the sheriff did not make any move to unlock the gate. He saw Wanderin' Willie standing with the others, a contemptuous and inimical expression on his face. He also saw Buck Randall, and remembered him as the one who had assumed the command of the posse. There were several other faces, too, that he recalled from the night before. Dunham's eyes roamed from one countenance to another, but he failed to find a gleam of sympathy in any of them. The stern visages only confirmed his own devastating fear that he was doomed to die at the hands of the men confronting him.

"These gents," said the sheriff coldly, "have decided what's the best thing to do with yo', Dunham. They're goin' to give yo' from now until to-morrow night to make up yore mind to tell whar thet gold is. If yo' don't come through by eight o'clock to-morrow evenin', I'll look the other way while

they take yo' out and swing yo' higher than a kite." He paused for a moment. "Thet's the idee, isn't it, boys?"

A murmur of assent came from the lips of the others, and then the sheriff commenced to close the heavy wooden door. The rest turned away and started for the front office, and for a moment Dunham was face to face with Dumbarton.

"Help me out of this mess and I'll give yo' half the money," Blackie whispered quickly to the old man. "I'll split square, sheriff, I shore will."

The door opened wide again, and the sheriff, with a growl turned to the men who were just leaving the room.

"Listen to 'im, boys!" he sputtered indignantly. "He jest offered me half of the ten thousand on condition thet I set 'im loose. Kin yo' beat it?"

"He's a desp'rate gent," laughed Buck Randall, "but I reckon he'll be more desp'rate by to-morrow night."

Then the door slammed shut and Blackie Dunham, once more, was left to his fears in the darkness. Once again he had been given a respite, but he knew in his heart that it would be a short one.

Like a caged and desperate rat, he felt his way around the walls of his prison, vainly hoping to find some chink or niche that would give him some encouragement. Inch by inch he felt with his hands over all of the surface of the floor. There might be a nail or a bar or some sort of implement that could be of use to him.

Finding nothing, he finally sat down in one of the corners of his prison, folded his arms across his upraised knees, and rested his aching head on them. There was nothing to do but to wait for death.

He saw again, in his imagination, the tall tree which, standing solitary on the barren butte, towered upward toward the stars. He saw the faces, contorted by ugly thoughts of vengeance, that had surrounded him the night before. He heard the fires

crackling around him and he saw the tall flames writhe and twist as though they too were in mortal agony. He sat upright and with one hand he felt of his throat; it seemed at that moment as though the coarse hempen rope was again scratching his neck.

But firmly he determined not to tell where the money was hidden. He would gladly relinquish it if by doing so he could save his life; but no one had suggested that compromise, and even if any one had Blackie Dunham would not have trusted the sincerity of the offer.

SUDDENLY he thought he heard a sound somewhere near him. It frightened him at first as he quietly and alertly listened. It seemed like the gnawing of a rat, and he shuffled one heel along the floor. If it was a rat, however, it was not frightened by the noise, for the grinding sound continued and kept growing slightly louder moment by moment.

Then Blackie felt a sharp stab in the back, and he leaped to his feet in alarm and thrust his hand behind him. The pain lasted only a moment, however, and he knew that he had not been badly hurt. It was as though somebody had thrust a sharp-bladed knife between some chink in the logs and pricked him lightly with it. He got to his knees and felt along the wall in the darkness, and his fingers touched a piece of moving steel.

It was an auger bit, and some one outside of the jail apparently was trying to withdraw it.

Blackie's heart beat fast with exultation. It was plain to him that some one was coming to his rescue. Who it was he neither knew nor cared. All that he wanted was to be free once more, to be out of the clutches of the cattlemen of Wallow. If he could make his exit from his cell and get on a horse he would show them a thing or two. He heard the bit rasp out of the hole, and he leaned over to listen.

"Blackie!" came a tense whisper.

"What do yo' want?" whispered Blackie in reply. "Who are yo', anyway?"

"It's me, Wanderin' Willie," came the reply. "I'm helpin' yo' to make yore get-away. Now listen!" the low voice continued. "I'll slip a hacksaw blade through to yo', and yo' saw to beat hell while I bore three more holes. It won't take long to cut out a section and leave a hole big enough for yo' to crawl through. Git to work now, Blackie, and don't make no more noise than yo' kin help."

A narrow steel blade, edged with keen teeth, slipped through the auger hole, and Blackie, as he had been directed, went to work. He made slow progress, but kept doggedly and desperately at it. The blade was difficult to hold, lacking a handle, and it was very much inclined to cut his hands. He untwisted the dirty bandanna that he wore around his neck and improvised a grip with it, and resolutely continued at his task.

Wanderin' Willie, in the meantime, bored three other holes from the outside with his large bit. The four holes formed the corners of a rectangle which, when cut out of the rear wall of the jail, would enable Blackie to squirm through the hole to freedom.

As he steadily and patiently continued to saw, Blackie wondered why Wanderin' Willie had come to his rescue. It occurred to Blackie that Wanderin' Willie might still be figuring on a split on the reward. The prisoner grinned to himself as this thought came into his mind.

He would not split that gold with Wanderin' Willie or with anybody else. He could make good use of the entire ten thousand dollars himself. It would keep him in the greatest comfort for a number of years in some little Mexican town down near the Rio Grande. There would be plenty of liquor for him, plenty of food to eat, and a pretty girl to keep house for him.

There were years of indolence and animal contentment ahead of him if once he could get down below the border with his ill-gotten wealth. His pleasing speculations took much of the tediousness out of his toil; and in a couple of hours he was within an inch of cutting into the last auger hole. He was in such a complacent state of mind that he actually was humming as he worked.

The blade finally cut through into the last hole, and he easily thrust out the square section of wall. Free! He could see out into the night. He could see the face of Wanderin' Willie, who was on his knees peering into the hole which their combined efforts had created.

"All right?" breathed Blackie hoarsely. "Kin I come out?"

"Everything's clear," replied Wanderin' Willie. "And yo'd better be on yore way as fast as yo' kin."

Blackie crawled out through the hole and, standing up, drew in a deep breath of air. He no longer felt bound and half choked as he had felt in the confines of the jail.

"I got a hawse fer yo' over yonder," whispered Wanderin' Willie. "And once yo're on it yo'd better go fannin' on yore way as fast as yo' kin. I didn't wanta see yo' hung, so I decided I'd risk helpin' yo' make yore get-away. Me, I don't wanta see no man hung."

"It was right decent of yo'," murmured Blackie, as Wanderin' Willie led him, by a circuitous route, to a little clump of trees in which the horse had been tethered. "I'm a grateful cuss when I'm treated right," he added, "and I'll fix it up with yo' fer helpin' me out. Jest stay around Wallow fer a leetle while, and yo'll hear from me."

"Aw, shucks," replied Wanderin' Willie, "I ain't lookin' fer no money from yo'. Of co'se, if yo'—"

He left the sentence unfinished as he led the way into the copse where Blackie's horse was awaiting him.

"I reckon the sheriff and some of the other gents in this town 'll be plumb a mazed in the mawnin'," chuckled Blackie after he had mounted. "Maybe they'll suspect thet yo' helped me fly the coop."

"No chanst," replied Wanderin' Willie positively. "I've made 'em think thet I fair hate yo'."

"Well, I reckon I'll be on my way," said Blackie. "Yo've done me a great favor, friend, and remember what I say and stick around Wallow until yo' hear from me. I ain't the sort of a gent who fergits."

"Good-by, Blackie," replied Wanderin' Willie, "and good luck to yo'. I'll wait until I git a message from yo'."

Blackie wheeled his horse and rode swiftly away, and Wanderin' Willie, left alone, chuckled softly to himself. He knew that wherever Blackie rode that night sharp eyes would see him and fleet riders would follow him.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE TRAIL.

THE jail-break was part of the scheme that Wanderin' Willie had evolved for recovering the gold. The slayer of Dan Corbin was to be trailed wherever he went. It was logical to assume that the first place he would make for would be the cache where he had concealed the ten thousand dollars. His greed, in this case, would prove his undoing, for the moment he had the specie in his possession he would be seized, relieved of his loot, and hung.

The idea had appealed to the members of the posse, and even to Sheriff Dumbarton himself. The latter was a liberal-minded old pioneer, and, while he had sworn to carry out certain duties connected with his office, he had no sympathy with the type of criminal represented by Blackie Dunham. The fellow had confessed his guilt, and,

sooner or later, must be hung. Not being a man inclined to quibble over details, the sheriff did not care particularly whether Blackie was strung up legally or illegally. The result, in either case, would be the same.

He had defended and protected Wanderin' Willie because he had felt that there was considerable doubt regarding the guilt of the young man. Under the same circumstances he would have done as much in behalf of Blackie. But the latter was a self-confessed and conscienceless murderer. In addition to this, he refused to reveal the whereabouts of a small fortune which he had stolen from a bereaved girl.

Outposts had been stationed so that they completely surrounded Wallow, because it had been impossible for any one to predict in which direction Blackie would ride after he had been liberated. He would, of course, be anticipating pursuit, and, with the cunning that he so very apparently possessed, he undoubtedly would do his best to delude any one who might follow after him.

There was no question in their minds but that he would make an attempt to obtain the gold before leaving the district. This had simply been taken for granted. It also had been assumed that he would make some effort to conceal his trail.

Blackie had retracted his first statement that the money was buried on top of Lonesome Butte, but they were not overlooking the possibility that this might have been the truth.

Buck Randall and two or three others were stationed at intervals along the highway that led past the butte and that continued on south to Dorado. Red Knowles, Dumbarton's deputy, had charge of the men who were strung out along the road leading north to Poco. The sheriff himself had taken some men, riding westward along the highway that passed the Bar-X Ranch and continued from there un-

til it lost itself in the broken foothills of the Big Horn Mountains.

It was over near the Big Horns that Wanderin' Willie had come across Blackie Dunham, and there was a possibility that the latter might make a dash for that rugged country where it was so easy to hide out for awhile.

Wanderin' Willie, for obvious reasons, had been picked out to play the rôle of a repentant friend, and he was to be the judge of his own actions following the release of the prisoner. So Wanderin' Willie lingered for a moment by the little copse after he had seen Blackie speed away into the night. He saw that Blackie was headed toward the south, but he was not at all certain that the outlaw would continue to go in that direction. He whistled softly, and three other men, who had been concealed with their horses farther back in the woods, came crashing in his direction.

One of them was leading Pancho, whose hoofs, like those of the other animals, had been thickly muffled with heavy sacking.

"I reckon he's ridin' south, boys," Wanderin' Willie whispered. "We kin start out after 'im, but we've got to go careful like. If he finds out thet any one's following 'im he'll never go near thet cache of his'n."

Wanderin' Willie leaped on the back of Pancho, and the four riders made their way across the turf to the hard surface of the sun-baked highway, where they at once put their horses to galloping.

"It's sorta spooky, this ridin' animals thev their hoofs muffled," remarked Billy Hawkins, one of the Bar-X punchers. And there would have been something mysterious and ghostly in the scene to any one who chanced to witness it—four riders in the night who sped along in almost absolute silence.

They rode for perhaps three miles, pausing a few moments every now and then to see if they could hear the

beating hoofs of the fugitive they were pursuing. Then, rounding a curve in the highway, they came upon a horseman who seemed to be waiting for them in the middle of the road. At first Wanderin' Willie thought that it might be Blackie, and he let out an ejaculation of impatience and disappointment.

When they reined up beside the mounted man, however, they learned that it was Jeff Rowlands, one of the watchers.

"He went past hyar fifteen or twenty minutes ago," Jeff said, "and he was a goin' like a bat outa hell. I waited a leetle while, thinkin' thet yo' might be follerin' 'im."

"He's headin' south fer the buttes," said Wanderin' Willie. "There ain't no question about thet."

HE touched the flanks of Pancho with his spurs and the tireless animal glided silently onward again. The four other riders followed after him and the five winged their way south like phantoms fleeing in the night. A couple of miles farther on they found another rider awaiting them. While they were still some distance away he waved his hand and, starting to ride ahead, was traveling rapidly by the time that Pancho brought Wanderin' Willie abreast of him.

"Blackie passed here fifteen or twenty minutes ago, ridin' as though the devil was chasin' 'im," he told Wanderin' Willie as they sped along without the slightest slackening of speed. It was apparent that the fugitive was getting the utmost out of the horse he was riding.

It was, naturally, not a particularly choice horse that they had allotted to Blackie. Wanderin' Willie had apologized for the animal himself and had told Blackie that, under the circumstances, it was the best he could do for him. The poor beast, however, must have been responding to his rider's

cruel urgings. Blackie, in any event, seemed to be holding his own.

Before Wanderin' Willie and his companions reached a point from where Lonesome Butte was dimly visible, a dark mass against the starlit sky, they were joined by two more sentinels. Each of them reported that Blackie Dunham had passed them, riding furiously, some fifteen or twenty minutes ahead of his pursuers. At a point some three or four miles from the butte the horsemen reined in their mounts and paused for a few moments. If the top of the hill really was Blackie's destination he would be on his way up the trail by this time. And if he was, he was being followed by the watchful Randall. The latter had planned to station himself at a strategic point along the highway—a point from where he readily could see whether or not Blackie turned off in the direction of the butte.

It also had been planned that, in the event he apprehended Blackie with the gold, Randall was to build a fire either on top of the butte or close to the foot of it.

Wanderin' Willie rode slowly ahead and the other riders followed after him. Fifteen minutes elapsed while they maintained their slow pace and kept watch for the gleam of a distant fire.

Another quarter of an hour went by and, because of their wary and deliberate approach to their destination, they were still a mile from the junction of the highway and the old trail that led across the level country to the great, square mountain that now was distinctly visible. Wanderin' Willie reined in his horse and the other riders gathered around him.

"Somethin' must have gone wrong," he asserted in a strained voice. "If Randall had trailed Dunham, and got the drop on him, he would have signaled us long ago. I reckon thet we'd better ride ahead as fast as we kin and look things over."

The others agreed. Being men of action, they were already weary of caution and impatient at the suspense under which they had been laboring. They put spurs to their horses and, in a little more than five minutes, swept up to the place where Buck Randall had planned to conceal himself. Wanderin' Willie leaped from Pancho and made his way into the brush and light timber which flanked the highway. The others dismounted, too, and followed after him. A candle in a "bug" gave sufficient light to make it very apparent that Randall had secreted himself in the place that night. The hoof-prints of his horse were plainly visible, also the imprints of his high-heeled shoes.

There was a certain sinister significance to Wanderin' Willie in the fact that Randall's horse was not there.

"Thar shore is somethin' wrong, boys," he asserted gravely and quietly. "Randall's hawse oughta be hyar, no matter whar he is."

"Maybe it's over at the foot of the trail leadin' up the butte," suggested Jeff Rowlands.

"Thar's jest a chance thet it might be," agreed Wanderin' Willie. "We'll have a look, anyway."

They all mounted and galloped over to the butte which was several hundred yards away. They made a careful search around the foot of the trail which led up the precipitous side of the mountain, but did not find either of the horses. Worse than that, there were no tracks that might have been made that night by either men or horses. It was plain that neither Dunham nor Buck Randall had ridden from the highway over to the butte.

The riders gathered around Wanderin' Willie whom they tacitly seemed to regard as their leader. With a furrowed brow he was considering the problem with which they were confronted.

"Maybe Blackie somehow got wise to the fact thet some one was layin'

for him, and jest breezed right past Randall," he suggested. "In thet case Randall would 'a' fanned along after him.

"**W**E might slope along down the highway toward Dorado fer a few miles," suggested Billy Hawkins. "We kin tell by one good look at the road if they went thet way."

"It seems to be the only thing to do," agreed Wanderin' Willie. "S'pose we do it and do it quick."

He timed his words to his action and, leaping on Pancho, he started to ride back toward the road. Striking that, he turned to the south and put the spurs lightly to his horse. The others trailed out after him and they sped along for three or four miles. They had ridden for a couple of miles over a stretch of road that was practically straight, leading through a level and grassy country. The highway had stretched before them, under the paling sky, like a strip of white ribbon. Wanderin' Willie was leading the others by perhaps a hundred yards when he disappeared around a curve that was flanked with trees and underbrush.

They saw him vanish and then, a moment later, he came galloping back in their direction again and waved his hand at them. Before they could come up to him, he had turned and disappeared again around the turn in the road. When they swept around after him they found that he had come to a halt and that he was looking down the highway ahead of him. They saw, too, what he was looking at.

A horse, without a rider, was pawing the ground in the middle of the road not more than a hundred yards away. And, less than fifty yards from them, a dark figure lay prone on the ground, huddled in the dust. The sky was pallid with early dawn by this time and the markings on the horse could be plainly distinguished.

"Thar's somethin' queer about all

this," Wanderin' Willie told the other riders. "Thet's the hawse we gave to Blackie Dunham and, shore as shoot-in' thet's the body of a man layin' thar in the road." He was silent for a moment and the others, too, felt a certain uneasiness that kept them voiceless.

"It appears thet some one potted Blackie," continued Wanderin' Willie, "and thet some one must 'a' been Randall. But, in thet case, what's become of Randall? Thet's what I'd like to savvy." He was silent again as he pondered over the situation. "Of course," he added, with a vibrant sternness in his voice, "thet might be Buck Randall layin' thar in the road."

It was impossible to identify the body at that distance, for it was whitened with dust.

"If it's Buck Randall," Wanderin' Willie continued, "it might be thet Blackie Dunham is hidin' out in the brush somewhere along hyar drawin' a bead on some one of us."

Then he suddenly spurred Pancho and the horse leaped forward.

"We'll see what's what, anyway," he called as he led the way and the others followed after him.

CHAPTER XIII.

AMBUSH.

BLACKIE DUNHAM was no man's fool. As soon as he had left Wanderin' Willie and had got a comfortable distance away from Wallow, he turned his attention to the problem of what was his wisest move. He had been freed from the Wallow jail and delivered from the hands of his enemies—or at least it appeared that he had been. Blackie, however, did not feel that he was out of danger; he felt, in fact, that he was in a decidedly precarious position and that he would not be safe until he had put a long distance between himself and this dangerous district.

His intuition, or his common-sense, seemed to tell him that there was something questionable about the circumstances surrounding his release from the Wallow jail. It hardly seemed credible that Wanderin' Willie had come to his rescue just out of pity. It did not conform with human nature as Blackie knew it. He had used Wanderin' Willie for a puppet, had lied to him and double crossed him; and he could scarcely believe that any man would be magnanimous enough to give such a deal. Wanderin' Willie had come within an ace of being lynched as a result of Blackie's machinations. That any Westerner would turn his left cheek to his enemy, after he had been properly walloped on the right one, rather taxed the credulity of Blackie Dunham.

Every now and then a series of chills would go skiing up and down his backbone as he urged along the old and somewhat decrepit horse that he was riding.

He considered it highly probable that a bullet might slip between his shoulders at any moment and make a little hole that would be sufficiently large to provide an exit for his immortal soul. That was the way, he knew, that undesirable prisoners were sometimes put out of the way. They were permitted to escape and then shot down as fugitives.

As mile after mile went by, however, he commenced to feel more secure. He paused momentarily, now and then, to listen; there was not the slightest sound of pursuit, not the least indication that he had been betrayed. And yet fear lurked in his mind, fear that he could not overcome. Something was wrong with all this.

He wondered if he dared turn aside that night to recover the loot that he had buried on the top of Lonesome Butte. In the panic he had experienced, after his seizure in Dorado, he foolishly had admitted that he had cached the gold on the butte; later, however,

he had denied this, and by this denial, by keeping his secret to himself, he had saved his life.

He felt now, though, that he had made an error when he had buried the specie. It had weighed about forty pounds, however, which was considerable of a burden to carry; and, while it had not formed a particularly bulky package, it had been an incriminating thing to carry around. It was safer, he had concluded at the time he was making his get-away, to hide the money for awhile in an out-of-the-way place where, sooner or later, it would be easily available.

And he had chosen wisely when he had selected a place in which to bury his ill-gotten hoard. Lonesome Butte was a landmark that a person passing through the district could not fail to see. Neither fire nor flood nor earthquake could ever scar or topple the mighty plateau of granite that rose so abruptly out of the rolling plains that surrounded it.

Blackie knew exactly where he had buried the money; it was under a certain branch of the big pine that rose from the center of the butte. He had sat on horseback, directly over his treasure, on the night that he had been expecting death at any moment. Never by a word or sign, however, after the admission he had made in Dorado and denied afterward, had he given any clew to the whereabouts of the money.

And now, as he sped along in the direction of the butte, he was in a deep quandary. Some insistent voice within him urged him not to pause when he came to the trail that led off toward the island of stone that towered above the prairie sea. He felt that he was riding through an atmosphere of menace and yet everything around him seemed peaceful and quiet. The sky, made lucent by the moon and stars, curved serenely down over the far horizon; the heavenly light seemed to expose every detail of the surrounding land-

scape as if for the purpose of reassuring the lonely fugitive that all was well.

NEVERTHELESS, when he caught his first distant view of Lonesome Butte, he felt cold terror. It reminded him, curiously enough, of a tombstone. He decided then and there that he would not even slacken his pace when he came to the butte; he would keep on riding, avoiding towns as far as possible, until he got back into the Smoky Hill River country down in Kansas.

Once there, he could stay under cover while he picked out three or four friends who would come back to Wyoming with him and help him recover the money he had buried. He felt that it was impossible for for him to remain alone any longer in the Wallow district. The odds against a lone man were too great; he felt the need of the support of his friends.

As he drew nearer to Lonesome Butte, and it commenced to tower ominously above him, he had the curious sensation that it might, at any moment, topple over and crush him.

When he was about half a mile from the trail, that led from the highway over to the butte, he reined in his horse for a moment. He sat there and listened alertly. Not a sound broke the silence of the night. He paused a little longer in moody meditation.

It occurred to him that his fears were absurd. If Wanderin' Willie had had any ulterior motive in releasing him from jail, it would have become apparent long ago. There had been no pursuit of him and, by now, he was many, many miles away from Wallow. He had at least assured his get-away. What, then, was the use of leaving the country without taking his money with him? Apparently everything had gone all right and it would still be hours before any pursuit would start from Wallow. He would have ample time to pause at the butte, recover his specie, and make his escape southward. Then

it never would be necessary for him to return again to the district in which he so narrowly had escaped death.

Surely that was the course to take. Then, instead of going back to Kansas, he could go straight down through Colorado, across New Mexico, and over the Rio Grande into the safety and peace and indolence of Mexico. After having arrived at the decision to recover his loot at once, he galloped along again and, in a few minutes, came to the junction of the highway and the trail leading over to the butte.

As he reined in his horse and came to a halt, fear once more took possession of him. There was a thicket on his right hand side that his eyes could not penetrate and he regarded it rather suspiciously. He saw nothing, however, and, despite the fact that he listened intently, not the slightest sound came to his ears.

He looked up at the ominous heights of the butte and, after steeling himself for a moment, he turned his horse into the narrow trail that led toward the base of the looming mountain.

At that moment he heard the whinny of a near-by horse and his blood seemed to turn to ice in his veins. He knew, in an instant, that the sound had come from the thicket and he wheeled his horse around violently and, leaning low over the animal, started down the main highway. He heard a crashing in the woods behind him and then there was silence. He rode furiously for a short distance and then ventured to look over his shoulder. He saw a lone rider coming toward him on a horse which covered the ground in silence, which seemed to be drifting in his direction like a phantom.

Blackie was deeply superstitious and for a moment he was seized with a horrible fear. Was it the ghost of old Dan Corbin on a ghostly horse?

It suddenly occurred to him that the hoofs of his pursuer's horse were muffled. That would explain the spectral lightness with which the animal glided

along the road. The thought brought back to Blackie the self-control which, for a moment, he had completely lost. He was certain, now, of one thing. An organized effort had been made to trap him and the person who was chasing him was identified with the plot.

It dawned on him that he had been liberated and then watched in the expectation that he would lead the way to his cache. That, undoubtedly, was why his pursuer had not shot at him; he was worth more to them alive than dead.

He broke into perspiration as he thought how readily he would have betrayed himself and lost both his money and his life if it had not been for the untimely neighing of the horse in the thicket.

LOOKING around again he saw, to his alarm, that the rider behind him was rapidly gaining ground and that the distance between them momentarily was closing up. Blackie's horse was badly winded and was becoming somewhat uncertain in its gait. The road ahead, Blackie observed, led straight through a stretch of level country and did not seem to offer any chance for concealment or the use of strategy. He applied the spurs cruelly to the flanks of his horse, but the worn-out and exhausted beast, after making renewed efforts for a few hundred yards, commenced to lag again. Then Blackie saw that he was approaching a thicket in which the road seemed to take a turn.

With one hand he drew a gun from one of his holsters and gave it a cursory examination. It was loaded and ready for action and he slipped it back into its sheath again. In a few minutes more he swept into the shadows of the woods and went dashing around a rather sharp curve. The road, from this point, seemed to go straight ahead for a few hundred yards and then it curved out of sight in the timber again. It was an ideal place for an ambush

and Blackie swerved his horse from the highway, regardless of the danger of the movement, and went crashing into the woods. Then he leaped from the back of the animal and ran to the edge of the brush.

At that moment his pursuer came into view and Blackie saw that he had slowed up and was riding cautiously. It was very apparent that the man on horseback was suspicious of an ambush and that he was taking such precautions as he could against falling into a trap. He drew up to a halt and scanned the stretch of highway that was visible to him.

Then, apparently satisfied that his quarry must have ridden straight on, he urged his horse on again. The animal leaped forward just as Blackie Dunham, from the screen of bushes in front of him, fired at the rider. The latter, at the sound of the shot, sprang from his horse and stood alertly in the middle of the highway. He was, apparently, trying to decide just where the shot had come from. His right hand was clasping the butt of his gun, but he had not withdrawn the weapon from his holster.

Blackie, taking careful aim again, fired once more at the man in the road and he saw him fall and lie silent on his back in the dust. He would have fired again at the limp figure, but he suddenly became fearful of making any unnecessary noise. A shot would sound so loud to him, there alone in the wilderness with a dead man.

Blackie waited for a few moments, peering at the figure in the road. Then, gun in hand, he slunk out of his covert and crept cautiously through the dust toward the body. Reaching it, he clutched the shoulder of the inert figure and shook it. There was no stir of life, however, and Blackie was satisfied that the fellow was dead.

To make certain of this, Blackie slipped his hand under the jacket and flannel shirt of his victim and placed it over his heart. He felt a faint and

rhythmic beating—the man was still alive. The broad brim of his sombrero had fallen over his eyes, and Blackie, curious to know the identity of the man he had shot, pushed the hat back and peered into the white face.

He saw that it was Buck Randall, the most vindictive of all those who were seeking to avenge the death of Dan Corbin. It very probably had been Randall and Wanderin' Willie who had set the trap into which he had come so close to falling.

Blackie stood up and looked down at the unconscious figure at his feet. He felt a sudden urge to drive one more bullet into Randall, to make certain of his death. But, as he stood there, fear again gripped him. He already had committed one murder in Wallow. He felt weak and incapable of slaying another man in cold blood. Besides, a shot would make so much noise.

He put his gun back in his holster. Randall would probably die anyway. A feeling of nausea swept over Blackie, and he wished, frantically, that he could quit the vicinity of Wallow forever. He could do that if he could get possession of his hoard of specie. It occurred to him that, with Randall out of the way, he might possibly manage this.

Randall obviously had been watching the butte trail alone. At least, nobody had followed him in the pursuit. It might be possible, Blackie thought, to make a quick dash to the butte, get the money, and ride for the south. He wanted to get out of Wyoming, once and forever. He mounted the sleek horse that had belonged to Randall and cautiously commenced to ride back in the direction of the butte trail.

Before he came to the turn in the road he dismounted and stole along on foot, keeping close to the edge of the brush. Dawn was coming, the sky was pallid, and he shivered in the chill air. He reached the curve and, keep-

ing himself concealed, peered to the north along the highway. A swift curse escaped his lips, for there, not more than a quarter of a mile away, he saw a group of riders galloping in his direction.

They were so close that he could see that the leader, Wanderin' Willie, was a considerable distance ahead of the others.

Blackie ran back to the horse he had appropriated from Randall, and, leaping to its back, dashed toward the south again. In a moment he had swept by the body of Buck Randall and disappeared around the next curve in the highway.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE BAR-X.

THE morning after Wanderin' Willie's unexpected return, Sally Lee Corbin was eating breakfast in the hotel before starting for the Bar-X. She saw Buck Randall at one of the tables and, while he spoke to her, he did not seem inclined to join her. He was still offended, she concluded, because she had refused to permit him to kiss her when they had parted the night before. She felt entirely indifferent to his attitude, and was even somewhat relieved at the prospect of eating alone.

She scarcely had ordered breakfast, however, when she caught a glimpse of Wanderin' Willie entering the room. She was surprised to find herself hoping that he would come and join her. She resolutely looked away from him, however, pretending that she was not aware of his presence, and simulated a look of surprise when he spoke to her, asking if he might sit with her at her table.

Despite the fact that she tried to greet him casually, however, she was painfully aware of the fact that she flushed as she looked at him, that when she answered his quiet and courteous

query her voice was very much inclined to be tremulous and revealing.

But then she sensed that he too was somewhat ill at ease. He smiled at her, but seemed at a loss for something to say. Somehow it gratified her to discover that he was not quite as self-sufficient as he had appeared to be in the course of her brief contact with him. Her discovery gave her a quick confidence and she adopted rather a bantering mood.

"You came back to Wallow sooner than I expected, Mr. Watson," she told him with a little smile. "I thought you would be gone for a long time."

"I thought so, too, Miss Corbin," he replied. "But I'm back now and I reckon I'll stay around fer quite a spell," he added meaningly.

She turned her eyes away momentarily and observed Buck Randall regarding her with rather a morose expression. So, womanlike, she turned at once to Wanderin' Willie and smiled.

"Wallow is a lively town. There are plenty of opportunities for a young man around here." She spoke rather maternally, with the attitude of a person giving advice to a boy.

"I reckon there are," he grinned. "I've taken advantage of one of them opportunities, and I reckon thet's why I'm goin' to stick around."

She blushed furiously, realizing that he referred to the night that he had kissed her. After all, he had more self-sufficiency than, a moment before, she had given him credit for. She glanced at him and discovered that he was still grinning. It was decidedly irritating to her.

"What was the opportunity that you took advantage of?" she asked with some asperity. "I don't recall—"

"To help a lady in distress," he asserted, and this implication made her even angrier. He did not give her time to voice her indignation, however. "I reckon," he continued, "thet I've fixed up a trap that Blackie Dunham 'll

stick his ugly head into; and if he does ye'll have thet money back in no time. Thet'll help a little, won't it?"

"It would help a great deal," she told him. "What kind of a trap are you going to set, Mr. Watson?"

He explained the jail-delivery scheme. As he unfolded the plan she felt a sense of relief.

"It is certain to work out," she told him with sparkling eyes. "After hearing what you have told me, I can go back to the Bar-X feeling easier in my mind. Of course," she added, remembering what Pinkham had told her the night before, "I won't have too much to worry about anyway. I guess that Mr. Pinkham wouldn't be too hard on me, even if I didn't get the money back."

The stern expression that she had seen on the face of Wanderin' Willie a couple of times before appeared again.

"I wouldn't reckon too much on thet Pinkham," he warned her. "As fer me, I wouldn't trust him as far as I would Blackie Dunham. Thar's Pinkham now," he added.

The banker, ignoring Wanderin' Willie, smiled at her and she acknowledged his greeting. Then Pinkham, after surveying the occupants of the room, went over to sit down with Buck Randall and commenced to talk.

After a moment's pause Wanderin' Willie remarked: "Maybe them two are wonderin' whether I'll take thet reward or not."

"It belongs to you," she said earnestly. "It had come to her mind again that the ten thousand dollars, even if recovered, was not her property. "I don't see how I can accept it, even if you do get it back."

"Well, we'll arrange thet somehow so's it won't hurt yore conscience," he replied.

They finished breakfast together. Wanderin' Willie got her horse for her and saw her started on her way back to the Bar-X.

"Don't yo' worry none, will yo', ma'am?" were his last words to her. "Somethin' tells me," he added fervently, "thet no harm 'll befall yo' while I'm around hyar."

BACK at the Bar-X, on the afternoon of the following day, as she thought of his words, she felt curiously at peace with the world. She had summoned all of her hands that very morning and had told them frankly of the situation that she was in, with only a few hundred dollars in cash and the ranch mortgaged. She also told them that Pinkham had advised her not to worry, and she expressed the opinion that, if the worst came to pass, the banker would give her some assistance. Mike Gilson, a bow-legged puncher, had taken it upon himself to act as spokesman for the outfit and, after various and sundry pokes and whispers from his companions, came forward.

"Ma'am," he had said, "yo' don't have to say no more. We knowed yore granddaddy, and we know yo', and as long as yo' need us—well, yo' know what I—we—mean, and I reckon thet's all thar is to say."

Now, as she sat at the desk in the living room of the ranch house, figuring out some little accounts, there was a suspicion of moisture in her eyes. It was a good world, after all, in which those who played the game on the level didn't have to worry so very much. To be loyal to your friends, to go the limit for those you liked; that, too, was the way of the West.

It was late in the afternoon when she heard the confused trampling of horses' hoofs outside the ranch house. Throwing open the door, she stepped out on the veranda. She saw Wanderin' Willie, his hat in his hand and a sober expression on his face, approaching the steps. She looked beyond him at the group of men who had ridden up with him. They had dismounted, and four of them were carrying some-

thing in the direction of the bunk house. She watched them for a moment, and then her eyes went back to the silent man who was now standing close to her. One of her hands went to her throat, and her eyes dilated a little.

"What has happened?" she gasped.

He took her by the arm, and she let him lead her into the spacious living room, and there she almost collapsed into a chair. She looked up and saw that he was regarding her with eyes that were troubled but sympathetic. She gathered herself together and said bravely:

"I'm all right now," she said. "Tell me what has happened—tell me everything. After all, I'll have to know sooner or later."

"Blackie Dunham," he commenced. "managed to make his get-away."

"That is nothing," she replied. "You are trying to spare me—to make it easier. Tell me the worst, and tell me now."

"And Buck Randall," he continued, "got into a mix-up with Blackie and—" He hesitated a moment.

"I know," she finished for him. "Buck is dead."

He nodded his head in silence.

"Tell me about it," she commanded, after she, too, had been silent for a moment.

"We found Buck stretched out in the Dorado road, three or four miles below the butte," said Wanderin' Willie gravely. "He was unconscious when we picked him up, but after awhile he revived. He had hid in a thicket whar the road runs near the butte," Wanderin' Willie continued softly, "and he was thar alone when Blackie rides up. Blackie is about to turn onto the trail leadin' over to the butte when Buck's horse sorta whinnies and gives him away. He took out after Blackie, but wouldn't shoot because he was afraid he'd kill Blackie and not be able to recover yore money. Then he run into an ambush and

Blackie plugged him. Buck had a chance to shoot back after Blackie's first shot, but even then he wouldn't draw because, I reckon, he was thinkin' of yo'. Leastwise, he said good-by to yo' before he died."

She sat there quietly for a moment, gripping her hands tightly together as though, by this means, she might prevent herself from breaking down. Then a flood of tears came to her eyes and, turning to a table at her side, she buried her face in her arms. A multitude of thoughts and visions, all of them concerning Buck, swept through her mind.

He had been so decent and loyal to her since she had been a mere child. And yet, only two nights before, she had refused to kiss him; and, on the following morning, she had left the dining room of the hotel in Wallow without saying a word to him. Not many hours after that he had ridden forth to his death, just for the sake of being of some assistance to her.

Tears came anew at these and many other memories, and it was many moments before she looked up.

TO her surprise, the room was empty; Wanderin' Willie had withdrawn so quietly that she had not heard him go. She sat there alone until night approached and the room became gloomy with shadows. Then she busied herself with her supper, ate and slowly washed the dishes. She had acted as housekeeper for her grandfather and since his death she had lived alone in the rambling old ranch house. Her work done, she went into the living room and, lighting the lamp, she sat down and commenced to sew. She wanted to do something, anything, to keep her mind from dwelling on morbid thoughts.

But, even as she stitched, she could not help dwelling on the problems which confronted her.

She had placed great dependence on Buck, who had been an able foreman

thoroughly capable of handling the affairs of the Bar-X. The first thing she would have to do would be to select his successor, and this she rather dreaded. As a matter of fact there was no one among the Bar-X punchers who seemed to be qualified to take over the responsibility. Buck Randall, being a young man, had been inclined to take on young waddies, and, while they were competent enough to take care of the ordinary duties around a ranch, none of them seemed to have the executive ability required of a foreman. Besides, if she picked one of them, some or all of the others were certain to be jealous.

If there had been plenty of money available the problem would not be so perplexing, but as things were going she needed the good will of every hand in the outfit. As she was sitting there, trying to decide how to proceed, she heard some one walk up the veranda steps, and a moment later there was a subdued tapping on the door.

As soon as she heard the footsteps she guessed that it was Wanderin' Willie. He stood there with his sombrero in his hand, looking very strong and very competent as he towered before her.

"I jest came to see, ma'am," he explained, "if thar is anything that I kin do fer yo'."

There was something in the tone of his voice that made her believe, for a moment, that he was getting ready to go away again.

"You are not going, are you?" she asked anxiously.

"Not this time, ma'am," he told her earnestly. "I'm goin' to stay around, as I told yo' before, till things git straightened out."

"Won't you come in for a little while?" she invited him. "Maybe you can suggest something. I don't know exactly what to do."

Closing the door behind him, she took his hat and drew a chair up close to the light for him.

"I'm worried," she told him after they both were seated, "about how to replace Buck." Tears again came into her eyes. "It seems cruel even to talk about it so soon."

"The world keeps on turnin', ma'am," he said softly, "no matter who passes along."

"I know that," she admitted. "Even when my grandfather died things kept on going just the same."

They were silent for a moment, and then he cleared his voice and, after some hesitation, he spoke.

"I was thinkin', ma'am," he said, "thet I might sorta look after things on the Bar-X for yo' for a little while until you' kin git a regular foreman. Yo' don't know me," he added apologetically, "and I realize thet. And I ain't got no time to git references from the places whar I've been a foreman. But I know my business, ma'am," he continued, "and I reckon thet I kin handle men as well as the next feller."

She regarded him with an expression of relief, as if in him she had found the solution of all her difficulties.

"It's sometimes better, ma'am," he urged, "to pick a stranger when yo' need a foreman. Thar ain't no jealousy then."

She knew that; she had just been thinking of it herself. His statement indicated that he knew something about ranches and about men.

"Then, too, ma'am," he continued, "thar's one more thing. Blackie Dunham never laid a finger on thet money he buried, and I don't reckon thet he'll be overanxious to show his face around these hyar parts ag'in. But, shore as shootin', ma'am, yo'll see a stranger or two, or maybe more, driftin' into the district pretty soon. They'll be friends of Blackie's, ma'am, and I'd sorta like to be on the reception committee to meet 'em."

He was silent for a moment as she looked at him meditatively.

"Because what I'll hand 'em,

ma'am," he concluded, "will be a lot more than the keys of the city."

CHAPTER XV.

PINKHAM SHOWS HIS HAND.

WANDERIN' WILLIE had been acting foreman of the Bar-X Ranch for about three weeks and had managed to accomplish a good deal. There was, as he had expected, some grumbling among the men when they first learned that he was to be their boss, but by the judicious use of diplomacy and discipline he had obtained an undisputed sway over them. The very fact that Sally Corbin had placed her faith in the stranger was sufficient for most of the men, especially when she told them that Wanderin' Willie, like themselves, was gambling on receiving his pay. The new foreman was not an easy boss, but the fact that he was an efficient one quickly gained him the respect and loyalty of the waddies.

The day after Buck Randall's body had been brought back to the ranch, Wanderin' Willie made preparations against any henchmen of Blackie Dunham. For several days, Billy Hawkins and Mike Gilson were kept in the saddle carrying messages to various towns scattered around Wallow.

Numerous officers of the law were advised of what had taken place and were requested to notify Sheriff Dumbarton at Wallow if any suspicious appearing strangers passed through any of their bailiwicks.

A continuous watch was kept on Lonesome Butte, for Wanderin' Willie was certain it was there that Blackie Dunham had cached his gold. A cursory search was made over the flat-topped mountain for the treasure, but it was not found. This was not particularly disappointing to Wanderin' Willie, because he did not expect such a search would bring any results.

Ten thousand dollars in gold, as im-

pressive as it may sound, can be put away in a comparatively small place. After he had taken every possible precaution to prevent Blackie's recovery of the money, the new foreman centered his energies on the management of the Bar-X. These duties, of course, brought him into frequent consultations with Sally.

She had ridden with him herself over the vast stretches of the ranch and had explained to him the current condition of affairs.

And now they were riding together, early in the morning, in the direction of Wallow. Sally was on her way to see Pinkham, an ordeal which she would have preferred to avoid, but which had at last become necessary. The interest on the mortgage which Pinkham held on the Bar-X was due in a few days, and she was determined to find out the banker's future intentions.

Wanderin' Willie was riding in with her for two reasons: first, because he liked to be with her, and, second, because he wanted to have a talk with Sheriff Dumbarton. It was about time, he thought, for some move on the part of Blackie Dunham.

"I wish that I didn't have to see Pinkham," Sally told him.

"I wish thet yo' didn't, Miss Corbin," he told her. "I don't reckon thet yo' pleased him any too well by makin' me yore foreman."

There had been considerable restraint between Sally and Wanderin' Willie since he had become one of her employees. He showed her the respect and deference that any man in the same position would have done, and each of them, in fact, tried to convey the impression that their one intimate moment had been forgotten.

SALLY went directly to the bank. She found Pinkham at his desk, and he rose and greeted her.

"I came to ask you, Mr. Pinkham," she told him, "what you intend to do

about the interest that is due in four days. I cannot meet it, as you know, but perhaps you will feel inclined to extend the time."

"Sit down, Miss Corbin," he suggested as he, too, seated himself, and leaned back. "You probably have heard, Miss Corbin, that I have foreclosed several mortgages in the past two weeks." Sally nodded her head without speaking, as she was afraid that if she did speak she would voice her indignation in no uncertain terms.

"I had the foreclosures made for two reasons," he explained with rising vehemence. "First, because it is time for people around here to learn who's running things; and, second, because I am going to be the king of the range in this district!"

She felt a little daunted by the vigor of his assertion; somewhat awed by the manner in which he regarded her.

"I have been out here for years, Miss Corbin," he told her, "and I have worked day and night to acquire what I have gained. With the land that I hold now and with the land that soon will fall into my possession, I will be the master of more than two hundred thousand acres. My work is just about done, Miss Corbin; for the rest of my life I am going to live like a feudal lord."

"I'm glad of that, Mr. Pinkham," Sally told him. "It must be pleasant to be able to retire with nothing to worry about. But—"

"But what you came to see me about was the Bar-X," he interrupted her. "Your property is in a bad location. I now own property on three sides of it, and I don't like the way that it cuts into my domain."

Sally had the feeling that all was lost, and she revealed this by the expression on her face.

"But there may be a way out of it, Miss Corbin," he told her. "It may not be necessary for me to foreclose. I will think things over and, in two or

three days, I will run over to the Bar-X and let you know what I intend to do."

He stood up, indicating that the interview was at an end. In another moment she found herself riding down the street in the direction of the office of the sheriff. She felt rather confused after her talk with Pinkham. Why, she wondered, did he intend to come to the Bar-X to give her his decision? Why did he boast so much of his acres and his power?

She had just reached the front of the sheriff's office when Wanderin' Willie came out, and, untying his horse from the hitching rail, leaped into the saddle. There was an air of excitement about him, and she looked at him questioningly.

"I reckon things are goin' to commence to start," he told her with a smile. "Five or six strangers have been seen in the vicinity of Dorado lately and all of 'em were headed north, tryin' to keep under cover. I knowed that Blackie would bring his gang back to help him." He paused a moment before he inquired, "How did yo' make out, Miss Corbin?"

She shrugged her shoulders prettily.

"I don't know yet," she replied. "Pinkham wouldn't tell me to-day what he intends to do. He said that he would come out to the ranch in two or three days and let me know."

"Hmm," murmured Wanderin' Willie, narrowing his eyes. "Thet's mighty consid'rate of him, now ain't it?"

They were riding up the street together, starting on their way back to the Bar-X, when a girl on a magnificent sorrel came galloping in their direction. She rode well and she was such a striking brunette that she drew a quick and admiring glance from Wanderin' Willie as she passed. She nodded nonchalantly to them, and Wanderin' Willie raised his sombrero as Sally returned the other girl's greeting with a casual bow.

"That is Penelope Pinkham," Sally told Wanderin' Willie as they passed on their way. "She is a stunning girl, don't you think so?"

Wanderin' Willie looked at Sally in a manner that again made her feel self-conscious in his presence.

"She's all right for a brunette," he said dubiously. "But thar's another brunette I'm more int'rested in," he added. Sally's golden head turned toward him quickly and a little indignantly. "Thet's Blackie Dunham," he explained with a grin. "I'm jest longin' to make love to that hombre with a forty-five."

IN the two or three days that followed, Wanderin' Willie lost no opportunity to insure the snaring of Blackie and his gang, and he had the coöperation of Sheriff Dumbarton in his efforts. Watchers were scattered throughout the district, with orders to report at once the presence of any stranger or strangers. Wanderin' Willie did not now underestimate Blackie's cleverness, and he intended to take no chances with him. Two of the Bar-X punchers, Tom Johnson and French Louis, together with Deputy Red Knowles, were stationed close to the beginning of the trail that led up the side of Lonesome Butte, and they guarded the place day and night.

Billy Hawkins and Mike Gilson, both of whom had the liking and confidence of Wanderin' Willie, were detached from ranch duty and permitted to scour the country on various spying expeditions.

Wanderin' Willie, in the meantime, stayed rather close to the ranch house, although he refrained from making himself at all obtrusive.

Pinkham came to see Sally in the afternoon of the day before the mortgage was due. She was alone in the ranch house, as usual, when, hearing a knock on the door, she opened it and found Pinkham standing there.

"I have come to talk over that matter of the foreclosure with you, Miss Corbin," he announced in a rather husky tone.

She invited him in, relieved to know that the crisis would soon be over. He seemed somewhat uncertain of himself, and Sally, for a moment, wondered if he had been drinking. And then she knew that he had been, for the odor of whisky commenced to taint the atmosphere of the room.

"I reckon, Miss Corbin—Sally," he said in an ingratiating manner, "that we can fix this Bar-X business without any trouble. To tell you the truth, Sally, I've been looking you over for a long time now and I figure that you are just the sort of a girl I want for a wife. You are young and fresh. you have got the figure of a thoroughbred, and me—well, I always did favor blondes. What do you say, honey? Shall we get married and throw our properties into one pot?"

Sally was dumb with astonishment. A proposal of marriage was the last thing that she had expected from Pinkham.

His insolence, and the fact that he was half drunk, infuriated her.

"You are insulting me, Mr. Pinkham," she told him. "I understood that you came here to discuss business, not matrimony."

"Sometimes matrimony is business—damn good business," he asserted. "Why don't you take a sensible view of things, dear?" he asked. "Why don't you say that you will marry me? I have money—power—"

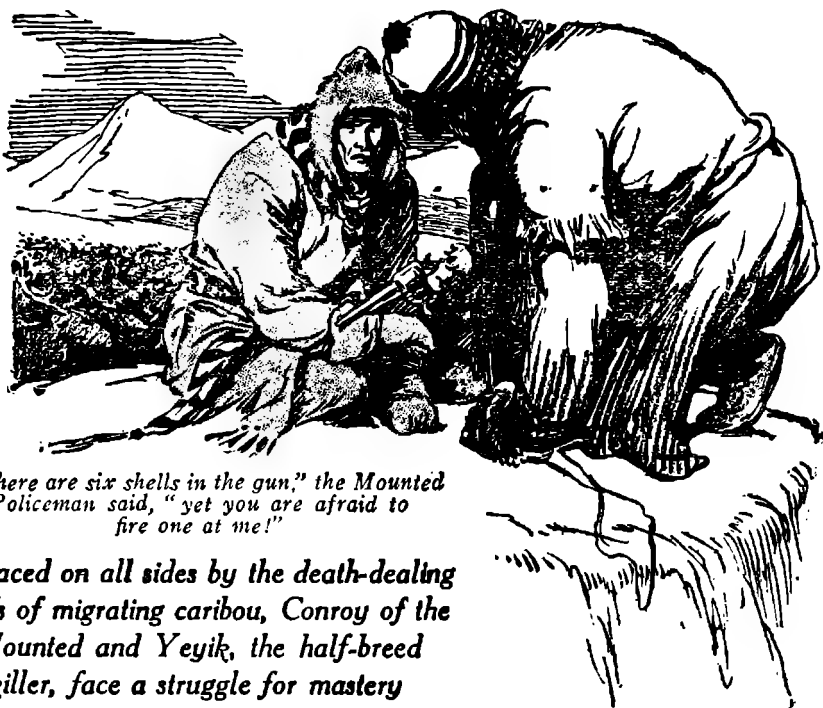
"You couldn't buy me with all the money in the world," she told him furiously, rising to her feet. "And with all of your power you can't compel me or any other woman to marry you. Please leave!"

He, too, rose to his feet and walked unsteadily toward her. He was a tall and powerful man, and there was fear in her eyes as she shrank away.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

The Arctic Legions

By A. de HERRIES SMITH



"There are six shells in the gun," the Mounted Policeman said, "yet you are afraid to fire one at me!"

Menaced on all sides by the death-dealing hoofs of migrating caribou, Conroy of the Mounted and Yeyik, the half-breed killer, face a struggle for mastery

THE monotonous clicking of deer hoofs on the rock valleys of the Barren Lands, and the faint fingers of light touching the granite ridges, told Corporal Conroy that another day had come.

The Mounted Policeman's bronzed face wrinkled with pain as he shifted his body into another position and glanced across the upthrust boulder that split the waves of migrating caribou.

Yeyik, the Yellowknife killer, was there, huddled down Indian fashion; he still had Conroy's Colt lying on the flat rock before him. In the half light the Mountie could not determine if the blurred figure opposite were asleep or awake; whether the man had purpose-

ly laid the gun there to tantalize him, or whether it was a case of rank carelessness on the Indian's part.

Conroy's eyes became pin points of gray light; the muscles stood out on his neck in little pulsing ridges. With a slow flexing movement the corporal yawned, doubled his arms, threw his shoulders back, and at the same time reached out one long leg toward the revolver.

The Indian made no move.

Another yawn, another stretch, and the Mountie's moccasin was within three inches of the weapon. Conroy blinked his eyes, edged along the rock again, and reached out once more. Still the same space existed between his tensed foot and the gun.

"*Hai, hai, hai!*" Yeyik's shout came all at once, ringing out over the clatter of hoofs and the clicking of horns. "I make the joke, see? *Hai!* I am a hunter—a strong hunter. I do not sleep."

With his leathery face split by a wide grin, the half-breed removed his right knee. Then Conroy saw that the native had a moccasin tie-string attached to the Colt's trigger guard. With the babiche cord passing under his knee, the native had been able to pull the weapon along without detection.

"Huh-huh. You're clever—at children's games," the corporal sneered as Yeyik rocked back and forth in silent laughter. "You're not clever enough to save your own hide, though. A poor hunter. *Tcha!*"

"A strong hunter," the half-breed countered, voice savage all at once as he jerked the gun to him.

"You lie, *sikak!*" Conroy retorted evenly, hard eyes still on the fingers playing with the Colt's trigger. "A strong hunter? You are but a jest for the old squaws squatting in the teepees."

"There are six shells in the little gun, and yet you are afraid to fire one at me!"

The Yellowknife brought the Colt's muzzle up in line with the Mountie's heart; then he dropped it again and recommenced fiddling with the trigger guard.

In time he remembered Conroy's reputation for both speed and cunning.

"I am a wise hunter, and no fool," the half-breed hissed in Cree, eyelids flickering. "Hah, one shot. What then? If I miss you, you are upon me like a wolf, and I go to the Big Stone House from which none return. *Namoya!* I live. If you desire death—behold!"

He waved a tattered arm at the deer surging by under the rock; white-eyed, wide-nostrilled in fear of

the man scent, their antlers almost touching the travelers' moccasins.

THE corporal shrugged his shoulders and slowly got to his feet, to stand staring into the north. He could see nothing but the hard blue sky and that moving blanket of deer covering the entire face of the Barren Lands. Thousands of caribou pressing forward for the shelter of the Last Woods, there to winter away from the Arctic's gales. The Mountie squatted down on the boulder again, face wrinkled in disgust.

Yeyik was on his feet now, padding up and down like a caged wild animal, the tassels of his gaudily beaded warm *capote* fluttering in the dawn wind. Back and forth the killer paced in soundless moccasins, one eye on the milling deer, the other on the Mountie.

"Hoofs! Hoofs! Hoofs!" the corporal said. "Forty million caribou. They'd trample you to death down there in two minutes."

Yeyik whirled at the corporal's words, thin lips snarling. The Colt was jerked up to his hip.

"Quite correct," Conroy laughed, watching the other man's wind-cracked face. "At least that is the estimate made by the Wild Life Department, and they should know. If we've butted into the main migration, we may be here for three weeks, waiting for them to pass—if we don't go mad in the meantime. Pleasant, eh?"

No reply but a scornful grunt.

"Gets you, doesn't it?" the corporal essayed a moment later. "Nothing but horns, horns, horns, and hoofs, hoofs, hoofs. Reminds me of France, Yeyik. Slogging along in the mud, head down. Feet—feet—feet! Jupiter! I'll never forget that."

"*Namoya!* Stop it," the half-breed shrilled in Cree, flourishing the Colt. The pupils of the man's brown eyes were dilating and contracting, his thin nostrils spread.

"Feet—feet—feet! Yes," Yeyik

went on again in his native tongue, unable to ignore the other man's words. "But think of the meat! Nothing to do but kill. *Hai!* I am a strong hunter and I have filled many cooking pots with caribou tongues."

Conroy nodded to himself, watching the native's lips working. Yes, that was Yeyik's reputation, all right. He had been a great hunter of animals before he took to hunting men instead. It had been told how he crouched in a stone shelter on the lip of the Pass and wantonly slaughtered hundreds of deer; then took only the tongues and left the remainder for the white foxes. Yeyik was a killer, right enough—he seemed to have it in his blood.

"Great to stand here and knock 'em over, eh?" the Mountie suggested. "Why, you could get three with each bullet. Dunno that you could, though. Those infernal hoofs would be likely to put you off. God, there's no end to them."

"Hoofs—hoofs—hoofs! You'll go mad before I will, though, Yeyik. Better give me that gun, and I'll get you through somehow."

"Got to take your medicine anyhow, and if I kick out there will be plenty more Mounted Police to take up and follow your trail, so—"

"*Namoya!* Enough!" the half-breed broke in on him, whirling about and jerking up the Colt again. "Listen," he added wildly. "In the mission I learn to count. Twenty, forty, hundred, but now—*sacré!* Did I have but an ax, a little Hudson's Bay camp ax, I could stand and kill—kill—kill. Aha! No more! Back! Back! Back!"

Conroy halted his forward slide and stepped backward in obedience to the gun's threat, until his heels were on the edge of the rock.

"Hell of a hunter you are!" the Mountie taunted, lips scornful. "You have a gun, you have a long knife, and yet you are afraid to kill. When this tale is told about the teepees there will be much laughter."

Yeyik snorted, but apparently had only half heard the words. He turned away again, his gaze on those myriads of legs crisscrossing each other in a maddening jumble.

Silence fell on the two while the forest of antlers surged on down the valley. Sleek brown bodies passed in unending procession, those white forefeet forever flashing under the cold sun's glint.

The whole world seemed to be filled with clashing antlers and the never-ending *click-click-click* of those dainty, death-dealing hoofs.

WATCHING the tide of animal life flowing past the boulder, it suddenly came to the Mountie that the caribou were even thicker than before and traveling at a greater speed.

Now and then one of the deer would be forced up on its comrade's backs as the pressure became unbearable. The fawns were bleating more, and the sweaty odors of the herds was accompanied by a heat fog that hung in the chilly air over the deer.

"By gosh, Yeyik, the caribou herds are—"

Cr-ack!

Conroy's words were fractured by the Colt's bark.

He whirled about just as the half-breed sent two more bullets thudding into the packed mass of animals underneath.

The stricken deer were instantly engulfed by those pressing on from behind, and in a moment the caribou were moving on as evenly as before.

Cr-ack! Cr-ack!

"All gone but one. But I can count, me," Yeyik shrilled, his voice almost a screech as the Colt's muzzle swung round on the Mounted Policeman. "Hoofs, hoofs, hoofs! I am a great hunter, but you—"

Conroy suddenly doubled down, jerked off his Stetson, and sent the hat skimming through the air. The stiff

brim caught the half-breed across the mouth, momentarily jarring him off his balance.

Three things came together with lightning speed; the revolver's crash, Conroy's rush, and Yeyik's plunge. The Mountie's fingers gripped the other man's *capote*, and came away with a handful of fringe as Yeyik leaped out into mid-air.

The jump put the half-breed astride one of the plunging backs below the rock, and Conroy obtained a fleeting glimpse of Yeyik clawing at a terrified caribou's antlers as he struggled to reach the hunting knife sheathed under his waist scarf.

An exultant yell floated up to the man on the boulder.

The corporal kicked the revolver back from the boulder's edge, gathered himself, and ran across the rock. Trail-hardened muscles shot him out into the air, and a split-second later his fingers were again gripping Yeyik's *capote*.

Under this double burden the caribou vented a bleat of terror and collapsed.

The two men rolled off the slippery boulder and into a mad jumble of stabbing hoofs—a veritable forest of flickering legs.

Still gripping the half-breed, the Mountie came half to his feet, only to be knocked over again by the rush of deer.

White hocks flowed past him in unending procession as he lay for a moment with his head protected by one arm.

"Now! Up!"

Conroy's shout reached Yeyik's ears, although the sound was almost drowned by the clicking hoofs. Some long-forgotten lesson in obedience, learned at the mission school, prompted the killer to respond. Together the men leaped to their feet.

Two wide eyes and a velvety snout suddenly filled the corporal's vision.

He crashed his fist into the caribou's nose, and was vaguely conscious of the animal's swerve. In that moment, while the deer threshed away through its comrades, Conroy's eyes caught the opening left by the brute's plunge. He grabbed Yeyik by the collar, half throwing, half carrying him toward the sheltering boulder.

They fell in a panting huddle behind the rock; Yeyik on the gravel, Conroy on top of him; still clutching the other's collar.

Over his shoulder the Mountie saw the white hocks flow on—twin streams, split by the boulder.

The two were still lying there, wordlessly, when five minutes later a furry shape trotted about the rock, propped, and swung about to snarl at the man scent.

It was a gray wolf, evil-eyed, with bloodstained jowls.

"Fine," Conroy said, getting to his feet. "The wolves have come, Yeyik. That means the tail end of the herds, with the packs pulling down the stragglers.

"I told you there was a break, but you wouldn't listen. Had a hunch you'd jump, too, but you did it too soon.

"That impulse to kill is hard to resist, eh? Well, the thing worked out all right, but I lost a damn good hat. Headquarters will likely soak me seven dollars and a half for another one. Hold still! I want that knife. All right, Yeyik, up on the rock."

They climbed the boulder. Conroy picked up his Colt, reloaded it, and then pitched Yeyik's knife away. Once more they squatted down, watching the fleeting gray shapes relentlessly hunting the aged animals and the weaklings, as the last of the herds milled past the rock.

An hour later, but for the two men padding over the hard-packed snow toward the post, the Barren Lands was a soundless, lifeless void.

THE END.



Gifford stood over the fallen gunman like an avenging angel

The Spectral Passenger

Mystery, death, and piracy stalk the decks of the Rio-bound Stella Maris as Grimaldi ghoulishly waits for disaster to strike Lionel Wing

By FRED MACISAAC

Author of "The Press Agent," "The Golden Burden," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

LIONEL WING, exporter, is ordered to take a sea voyage for his health; but the financial problem seems insuperable until one Hernando Sortez commissions him to take a verbal message to Jaime Portala, who lives in Petropolis, a suburb of Rio de Janeiro. The message is, "Let not the sun set until the moon rises."

Aboard the slow *Stella Maris*, Wing finds a curious passenger list, mostly Portuguese-speaking Brazilians. At once begins a startling series of mysterious murders. First, a Brazilian,

Montana, is found stabbed in Wing's cabin. Then a Senhora Veliza, who had come aboard with Montana, is strangled in her cabin, while Wing is walking near by with Maria Wenham. An attempt is made to kill Wing himself with a *bola*, an Argentine weapon of two lead balls fastened with a short cord, which is aimed to break a neck. And another passenger, Gifford, frustrates an attempt to strangle Captain Grigsby with a lasso.

Grimaldi, a hairless and repulsive giant who reminds Wing of an octo-

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for February 9.

pus, had foretold disaster to Wing, and warned him to follow his—Grimaldi's—example, and be a spectator at the ghoulish drama. Grimaldi identified Montana as a cousin of the president of Brazil, and named several men aboard who knew him—Emanuel Sousa, who has been paying attentions to Miss Wenham; Gratz, a German coffee merchant; Felix Issoto, Jewish jeweler of Rio; and Augustus Wenham.

Both Captain Grigsby and Purser Sprowle fear Grimaldi; they regard him as a jinx, and refer to the mysterious deaths of men who had offended him on past voyages. Wing blames him for the murders, yet he always has an alibi.

Another attempt is made on Wing's life, when poison gas is poured into his room through the ventilator; but he cannot catch his attacker. His friend Hank Gifford has a theory that Montana was killed by mistake for Wing; and Wing's doubt of this is shaken when he receives word from Maria Wenham that somebody on board knows about his having a message from Sortez.

Grimaldi secretly summons Wenham to his cabin, and, threatening his daughter's life, forces the old man to betray his trust and surrender a document which Senhora Veliza had given him to deliver in Rio. But Grimaldi finds the document is blank!

Issoto, who has just received a code radiogram from New York, tells Sousa that Lionel Wing should never reach Rio. Sousa himself is jealous of Wing's attentions to Maria.

Gifford is enjoying himself flirting with Doris Drexel, a good-hearted cabaret girl on her way to Rio; but the Wenhams, for some reason, forbid Maria to have anything more to do with Lionel Wing.

Meantime the *Stella Maris* goes steaming on, with five millions in gold in her hold, and several New York gunmen—Kregan, Mott, and Louis

Peterson—scheming to seize it. She is being driven almost to the limit, and suddenly, one of the stokers, mad with heat, leaps overboard.

"The third death," says Grimaldi in Wing's ear.

CHAPTER XVIII (*Continued*).

THE MAD STOKER.

WING turned, and would have struck Grimaldi had the creature worn his usual leer—but for once he was not gloating.

"Why did it happen? What made the man jump overboard?" Wing demanded. It was the first time he had spoken to Grimaldi for days, but in his excitement he would have talked to anybody.

"He was tortured until he went mad," replied the fellow. "The heat in the stoke hole is so intense that firemen often go crazy and commit suicide. I was once on a ship when one of them thrust his head into his furnace."

"But why don't they use oil burners in the tropics?" Lionel demanded.

"They cost too much to install on these old ships and during this voyage the stokers are being overworked. No doubt several of them will die before we reach Rio."

"It's terrible," declared Wing. "Why are they being overworked?"

Now Grimaldi smiled his awful smile. "To make speed. The captain wishes to break his record to Rio. Do you want to know why?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because there is gold on board," the man croaked. "Millions in gold which must be in Rio on a certain day. What are a few lives compared to gold? Do you know why this ship did not turn into an American port and permit the police to find the murderer? The gold. Do you suppose this captain cares any more for the lives of passengers than of stokers? All he wants is to deliver the gold."

His vehemence impressed Lionel Wing. For once the man was not sardonic nor ghoulishly triumphant.

"Gold on board. I didn't know that," he muttered.

"I did," said Grimaldi. "That is why I knew that tragedy would travel with us on this ship. Gold in bulk always provokes murder. It brings the worst human passions to the surface. Three deaths already have paid toll to the yellow curse, and more to come."

Wing gazed at him intently, but the man's face was a perfect mask. The greenish-gray eyes were expressionless.

"This stoker, perhaps," Wing protested. "But the stabbing of Montana and the strangling of Senhora Veliza—do you mean to say that this gold shipment is responsible for those crimes?"

"Without doubt," nodded Grimaldi. "Let those beware who get into the path of the gold. Take warning, Mr. Wing. Do not meddle with what does not concern you. Your attitude toward me is hostile; you have not hesitated to insult me, yet I warn you that you, also, are in the path of the gold."

He turned and stalked away leaving Wing trembling with an alarm which he assured himself was superstitious. He had been convinced at one time that it was Grimaldi who had twice attempted his life, then he had been shaken in that belief by the thought that his verbal message from Hernando Sortez was responsible for the attacks on him and that Montana might have been slain because he had lain down in Wing's stateroom. Now Grimaldi took the trouble to tell him that his danger came from this shipment of gold, of which he had heard for the first time.

WHAT was that message which had drawn him into deadly danger?

"Let not the sun set until the moon rises."

Hernando Sortez had occupied a

suite of offices on the ground floor of Wing's building with a direct entrance on the street, and Wing had never encountered him before the accidental meeting in the renting agent's room. He had never dealt with Sortez's export house.

There had been nobody with the agent except a woman bookkeeper in a corner of the room who had not lifted her head from her work during his visit. As Sortez had no desire that anybody should know his business with Wing, it was most unlikely that he had mentioned it himself below stairs and Wing had kept the transaction locked up in his mind. He had personally purchased his ticket on the *Stella Maris* and paid cash given him by Sortez.

Gifford had shrewdly pointed out to him that the death of Montana might have been meant for his own; and, when he scouted that, there came a warning from Maria Wenham that his interview with Sortez was known on board.

Now Grimaldi informed him that he was in the path of the gold as had been Montana and Senhora Veliza—which meant that Grimaldi, also, might know that he carried a message from Sortez. In some way or other his message appeared to have something to do with this vast shipment of gold which the *Stella Maris* had on board.

For the first time he began to see a little light. This gold had to be in Rio on a certain day. To deliver the gold Captain Grigsby was driving his ship at beyond her normal speed and causing stokers to go mad.

Could there be a party on board which wished to prevent the shipment from arriving on time? Why, that might explain the attempt to rope and capture Captain Grigsby. It might account for the presence on board of the men whom Doris Drexel had identified as New York gunmen.

There were, he suspected, people on board who wished to prevent him from delivering his cryptic message to Sen-

hor Jaime Portala. Having searched his effects and found nothing they must have divined that he had a verbal message and so wished to stop his mouth forever. Were these the people who had slain Montana and Senhora Veliza? Were they aligned with the American yeggs on board, or were there several groups working at cross-purposes on this wretched ship?

The warning from Maria was tremendously important. She had said she overheard a conversation in Portuguese, but it was possible that her father had let drop something to her mother about it. Wenham, in some way, was mixed up with the unfortunate Montana. He had been in New York on a mysterious mission, he was half Brazilian. Which side was he on? Had he sent the warning to Wing by Maria or was he allied with those who sought the life of the American?

And on which side did the mysterious Grimaldi stand, the self-styled spectator? A man who wishes to kill another does not warn him that he is in danger, but Grimaldi was capable of even that originality.

Heartily Wing wished that he had refused the offer of Sortez and paid for his own transportation upon some innocent and peaceful cruise. Sortez was a man who inspired confidence; Wing had liked him on sight, yet he had thrust the American into horrible danger with the assurance that there was no risk in the message he was asking him to carry.

Yet Sortez had admitted that he could neither write nor cable Portala without risk of his messages being intercepted, and that ought to have warned the American that he was taking some risk even if the prize offered him had not done so.

A HAND touched him on the shoulder and drew him from his absorption with a start. It was Doris Drexel. Behind her was the grinning face of Gifford.

"How about a game of deck tennis?" demanded the dancing girl. "You ought to begin to take exercise, Chuck, and it'll take all our minds off of what just happened."

He shrugged his shoulders and shook off his burden. "Right," he said. "Who'll make a fourth?"

She smiled teasingly. "We'll ask Maria Wenham."

She joined them with alacrity and Maria, who was sitting with her parents and Emanuel Sousa, consented without regard for the young Brazilian's instant frown.

Just aft of the deck house there was a clear space on deck where a tennis net had been set up and Wing was introduced to what looked at first like a silly game, but which proved to be one requiring both skill and agility. He played with Doris against Gifford and Maria while Sousa and a dozen other passengers stood on the side-lines and watched the game.

They played for an hour and Wing found himself physically fatigued, but mentally stimulated. He had been able to exchange only a few perfunctory words with Maria, who played like a fury and carried her side to victory. The luncheon gong brought the game to a close.

Subconsciously Wing worked out part of his problem while he played. Now, on his way to his cabin to wash for lunch, things seemed to dovetail into some semblance of order.

In Rio some very important business transaction depended upon the arrival of a big shipment of gold on a certain day which was to be used to close a deal. Senhor Jaime Portala was one of the principals of this deal and Hernandez Sortez was concerned in it with him. Sortez wished Portala to withdraw if possible, most likely because there was a better offer in the offing.

"Do not let the sun set until the moon rises." That might mean that he must hold off settling this transaction, the sunset, until another offer

came, the rising moon. There were people on board who were so interested in putting the deal through that they would commit murder, and these had got wind that he carried the deciding word to Portala. These were the people who were responsible for the gold shipment and in whose interests Captain Grigsby was out to break his record to Rio.

The Sortez party presumably wished to prevent the gold from arriving on time, and they had tried to capture the captain and perhaps force him to slow up or put into some port for delay. Grimaldi, judging by what he had said, might be on the side of Sortez, in which case he was an ally and not an enemy of Lionel Wing.

But this did not explain the murders, nor the attitude of Wenham, nor the business on board of Kregan and Mott and the smooth young gunman Louis Peterson. It did not explain a lot of things, but it was a theory to go on.

Lunch was the usual thing, only the cold meats palatable; a business to hurry through, especially with Grimaldi like a skeleton at the feast. Gifford and Wing left the table early and went up on deck just as Captain Grigsby came down the ladder from the bridge. He would have passed them without speaking had not Gifford saluted him cordially.

"How's latitude and longitude, skipper?" he demanded with an expansive smile.

The captain, who apparently was in a brown study, started, glanced at them with vacant eyes, and muttered something, then brushed by them.

"Snubbed," gasped Gifford. "Considering I saved that hombre from being hung, I think he's got a nerve."

Wing laughed. "I expect the skipper has a lot on his mind," he stated. "I was so shocked at that fireman committing suicide, this morning, that I talked to Grimaldi for the first time in days, and he tipped me off that the

hold of the ship is crammed with gold. That's why we're making such good time; Grigsby wants to get into Rio as soon as possible."

"I don't give a hoot. Next time I talk to him he'll have to make the advances," proclaimed the ruffled Gifford. "Listen, Chuck. I had a long chat with Doris last night, and she told me about a warning that Maria sent to you."

"Just like a woman," commented Wing. "She was supposed to keep that quiet."

"WELL, it seems you were holding out on me when you said there was no reason why anybody should try to bump you off."

"No," denied Wing. "At the time I couldn't think of any reason. I happened to be bearing a verbal message from a person in New York to a friend of his in Rio, and I considered it of no importance, but it seems that somebody on board is interested in it."

"I get you. Somebody wants to keep the message from being delivered."

"Well, I'm hanged if he will," declared Wing angrily. "Look here, old man. Come over to the rail where nobody can hear us. Now I promised to whisper something in a certain person's ear when I get to Rio, and I want to make sure that the message gets through. Would you be willing to carry it on if they did happen to snuff me out?"

"You bet," replied Gifford succinctly. "Provided I come out of the fight alive."

"It won't be a fight. If they get me, it will be when I give them a convenient opportunity. They might reach me when I was asleep. But it would be a neat revenge to have the word go on anyway."

"All right. What is it?"

Wing gave him the name and address of the recipient, and then repeated the message.

Gifford looked disgusted. "I expected something exciting. It doesn't make sense. Sometimes the moon is in the sky when the sun goes down, but, even if it isn't, how is this old codger going to hold the sun? I never believed that Joshua did it any more than I believed that Jonah lived three days in the belly of a whale."

"It's a code of some sort," Wing assured him. "And its importance is evident by the measures they are taking to keep me from delivering it."

"Well, kid, I'll carry the 'message to Garcia,'" the Westerner declared. "Maybe they've given up the idea of bumping you off."

Wing shook his head. "They are biding their time. We've ten days more on this tub. Only this morning Grimaldi gave me a warning."

"But he's the fellow who is after you," said the surprised Hank.

"I thought he was, but I'm not so sure now. It's a nuisance to be helpless the way I am."

"I'll loan you my gun."

"I don't know how to use it. I never fired one. Besides, you may need it."

"Move into my cabin."

"No, I'll stick it out alone. I don't sleep much at night, and I make up for it in the afternoon. I'm going down now for a nap."

"You're going to get to Rio, and you and I will paint the town red," Hank assured him. "Keep a stiff upper lip, but don't ever turn your back to one of these Brazilians."

CHAPTER XIX.

A WOLF BARES HIS FANGS.

THEY walked along the deck to the smokeroom, passing many passengers stretched in deck chairs and others who sauntered along or who leaned on the rail and looked at the sea.

They seemed harmless people, Wing

thought, just travelers making the best of a long voyage, exchanging simple amenities with one another, already forgetful of the double tragedy which marked the first day out, no longer thinking of the poor mad stoker who had jumped into the ocean a few hours before—a very ordinary sort of ship's company, the Latins even more courteous and considerate of one another than the Anglo-Saxons. One group of Brazilians around two ladies in deck chairs were laughing gayly. Doris Drexel and Maria Wenham were coming toward the young men, charmingly contrasted types of girlhood.

It seemed preposterous that among these people lurked brutal murderers; that death, even now, might be stalking Wing's own footsteps; that it was his business to regard all with suspicion except the two girls, of course, and Hank Gifford.

Of all the passengers there was only one he hated, Grimaldi; and one whom he despised, Sousa. And he was not sure now that either of these was his mortal enemy.

Who was the *bola* man? Who the gas poisoner? Who the wielder of the deadly poignard? Which was the strangler? Aside from Sousa, none of the Brazilians had particularly attracted his attention. He was not aware that the frail-looking, whiskered Portuguese Jew, Issoto, whom he passed without a second glance as he lay wrapped in his blanket this hot day, was gazing at him venomously from half-closed lids. Wing found it difficult to retain his conviction that he was actually in danger.

It was only a little over a hundred feet from the forward rail of the passenger deck to the end of the promenade, and from there the two men looked down upon a cargo hatch where half a dozen members of the fire-room crew, off duty, lay in sleeveless shirts, basking like lizards in the sun.

"It makes me hot to look at them," said Gifford. "Come in and have a cool, refreshing drink. Wait till I call Doris. I don't suppose Maria's folks would allow her in the smokeroom."

He waited at the smokeroom entrance, and the man Kregan came upon him.

"How you makin' out?" he demanded of Lionel.

"All right. And you?"

"Oh, fair. The liquor's good, if the grub is punk. Say, ever been in Rio?"

"No. Have you?"

"Nix. They say it's a hot town."

"It's lively, I imagine."

"Well, after this anything would be good. Say, what kind of a guy is this Gifford? Sort of fresh, ain't he?"

"I like him very much," said Wing sharply.

"Yeh? Do you know he parks a gat?"

"What do you mean?"

"Got a gun on him."

"How do you know that?" Lionel demanded.

"I heard it. He pulled it on some guy that was trying to croak the skipper."

Wing looked at him suspiciously, but the fellow evaded his eye.

"So, that story got out," he commented. "Well, Mr. Gifford used to be a cowboy, and he's a dead shot."

"Yeh? You don't have to be a cowboy to handle a gun, kid. I know fellers right in lil ol' New York that could probably plug him while he was trying to get his rod out."

"What are you going to Rio for, anyway?" demanded Wing. "New York getting unhealthy?"

Kregan grinned. "Oh, we just thought the sea air would be a change. Got any idea who killed them folks?"

"No. Have you?"

"Some dago. The skipper claims he is locked up, but I don't believe it, do you?"

"I don't know anything about it."

"Come in and have a drink," invited the tough.

"No, thanks. I'm joining Mr. Gifford and this young lady."

"Well, see you again," said the man affably, and walked away.

"NOW," thought Wing, "that fellow was pumping me. He wanted to know something about Gifford. Why?"

Doris and Hank joined him then, and they entered the smokeroom, which was empty save for the steward on duty. They ordered long, cold lemonades, and chattered airily and aimlessly for awhile, then, while the steward was in the bar, Wing repeated his conversation with Kregan.

"Those yeggs are getting ready to start something," opined Doris, "and Hank worries them. My Gawd, do you s'pose they're going to shoot up the ship?"

"There are only three of them that we know of," Wing replied. "The officers are armed, and there are more than a hundred in the crew. I don't think—"

"They might," said Gifford. "The gold shipment must look pretty good to them, and they may have a scheme to get it."

He broke off, for Kregan and Mott entered the room. The fat crook hesitated as the pair were passing the girl and her friends, and then halted.

"I know you," he said to Doris. "I been trying to place you since I seen you come on board. You used to dance at Garnett's Garden."

"I spotted you and your boy friends right away quick," replied the girl boldly. "You're a long way from Forty-Seventh Street, brother."

Mott gave her a gold-toothed grin. "Travel, and see the world," he observed.

"Remember me, miss?" asked Kregan, eying her boldly. "You used to do a Cleo number in Garnett's."

Doris eyed him impudently. "You got a map that is hard to forget. And your friend Louis—how does he like traveling?"

"Oh, fine," replied the pair in unison.

"Let's all have a little drink; five Yankees a long way from home," suggested Mott.

"Hold your horses," said the girl sharply. "I told you I knew you guys. I don't know what your game is on this ship, and I don't care. These are nice kids here, and I got my reputation to look after, so we'll just say 'Hello' when we meet, but no mixing. Get me?"

The two men had been about to squeeze in alongside of her on the wall bench, but they changed their minds.

"You're a fresh little hooper," snarled Kregan. "I guess we're as good as you are any day—"

Gifford was on his feet, his fists clenched and his dark eyes snapping dangerously.

"You're talkin' to a lady," he rumbled. "You heard what she said. Now meander."

"Hah!" snorted Mott. "This little moll—"

Gifford's right fist drove forward like a piston and caught the big man on the point of the chin. The gunman went sprawling and landed on the deck with a crash. With an oath he reached for his hip pocket as he lay there, but mysteriously a gun was now in the hand which had struck him, and Mott made no further effort to draw. Kregan, however, had not been idle, and was moving to get behind Hank when Wing wriggled out from behind the table and threw his arms around the second crook in a tight embrace.

"Good boy, Chuck," observed Doris, whose eyes were bright with excitement. "Snappy work, Hank. Now, you two bums, listen to me. You had it coming to you. You had no business butting in where you were told you

weren't wanted. Hank, put away that gun. There won't be no more trouble."

"I'LL get you for this," threatened Mott as he clambered to his feet.

"No, you won't," Doris told him. Her self-possession was extraordinary, for she had not even risen from her seat. "You're going to have trouble enough putting over whatever your game is without a private war with my friend Hank here."

"Let go, feller," said Kregan mildly. "The kid is right. Mott, we had it coming to us."

"You can talk," growled Mott. "You didn't get a wallop on the jaw."

"Aw, come on out of here," advised his friend. They departed, Mott throwing a savage glance over his shoulder at Gifford.

"Now, you kids sit down," commanded Doris. "Hank, you were altogether too quick with your fists. I would have sizzled that yegg with a few well-chosen words if you'd stayed still."

"What kind of a man would I be," asked Hank sulkily, "if I let a lady friend of mine be insulted?"

She took his big fist and squeezed it. "What a piledriver you've got!" she admired. "And, Chuck, you probably saved Hank from being drilled from behind. These New York gunmen shoot first and think about getting the chair afterward. Now, you got a couple of fresh enemies. I ought not to have come in here."

"Oh, we were sure to have trouble with them sooner or later," Wing said. He was panting with excitement and pride. He had been astonished at the strength of the grip he had used upon Kregan. The man had been powerless. In nine days of rest and sea air he had gained back the greater part of his forces.

"You told that Mott to meander—what's that mean?" demanded Doris of Hank.

He laughed sheepishly. "Oh, it's an expression we used to use on the range. It just means go away."

"Didn't you ever hear the old song, 'Meander Down the Lane'?" asked Wing.

"It was before my time," said Doris. "Let's go out and mingle with some pleasant people like Grimaldi."

CHAPTER XX.

STORM AND DISASTER.

WHEN Wing retired that night he found his stateroom porthole tightly closed, which meant that the ship's officers expected bad weather. With some difficulty he succeeded in unfastening the screws and opening the port, for he preferred to take chances with the sea than to go to sleep in a room which might again be filled with poison gas.

The ship was rolling rather more than usual and a strong breeze blew in through the open port. He decided to take a chance on his berth, for at any time a sea might find its way through the opening and drench him as he lay on the sofa. So he undressed, crawled under a sheet, and was soon rocked to sleep. His awakening was rude, for he found himself thrown bodily out of the bunk and his head bumped violently against the deck.

He got up by grasping the edge of the berth, and as he did so a ton of water poured through the port, flooding the room. Then the vessel shifted sharply to the other side, and he waded through six inches of water to the sofa, upon which he climbed and unhooked the port window, dropped it. He was screwing it tight shut when a second sea struck it and some water seeped in.

He heard cries and screams from various parts of the passenger quarters, heavy crashes when trunks fell over or when a passenger was tossed out of his

berth. Stewards were running up and down the passages. He picked up his bags, already damaged by water, and put them in the berth, jamming them lengthwise between wall and rail so that they would not fall out.

Meanwhile he was standing knee deep in water when the vessel rolled to starboard, and he was out of the water when it rolled to port.

Fortunately the temperature of the flood was close to eighty degrees, and it was not too uncomfortable. He opened his stateroom door, hoping that part of the sea would run out into the passage, which it proceeded to do.

For the remainder of the night sleep was impossible, nor could he lie down. The vessel rolled ferociously and quickly acquired a fore and aft motion which was sickening. The wind seemed to have risen with great suddenness and it howled through the ship while every few seconds there was a harrowing metallic rattle when the screws were thrown out of the water and revolved in air.

He heard women shrieking on all sides, Latin women who were sure the ship was sinking. He had no fear of the stout old craft's foundering, but the experience was the most unpleasant of his life. To make matters worse, it was frightfully hot in the cabin with the port closed, and seemed to be getting hotter. The water, sloshing around the deck, seemed to him to be steaming, and he was perspiring from every pore of his body.

He sat on his sofa, bracing himself and holding on when the sofa climbed high until it seemed vertical instead of horizontal and then the side of the ship would become the deck and his feet would be up in the air. Although he had not been seasick during the previous spell of rough weather, the excessive motion, the heat, and closeness of the cabin now caused him to experience nausea.

Once the ship leaned so far over that it seemed impossible that she could ever

right herself, and he remembered tales of vessels turning turtle and drowning crew and passengers who were caught like rats in a trap. He was not aware of it, but this sudden list was caused by the maneuver of getting the ship hove to. After a few minutes she slowly righted herself and now she pitched violently, but rolled less.

She was no longer struggling broadside through the storm, but now had her nose in the wind and just enough power on to keep her from sloughing off into the trough of the sea. In this position she rode through the night.

After an eternity the blackness outside turned to gray. The porthole was so covered with brine he could not see out of it, but he knew the sun was rising and the dreadful night was over. He managed to dress himself in wet clothes and when his watch told him it was seven o'clock he felt his way into the passage and holding onto the hand rail he crawled along the main companionway until he came to the staircase to the upper deck. He met nobody.

HALF sick as he was, negotiating the stairs could only be compared to going up one of those trick staircases at Coney Island, but he succeeded at last and stood in the main companionway. The ship was still lurching and shaking like a stricken thing, and the ferocity of the wind was more evident here than below. He wanted to get on deck, nevertheless. He wanted fresh air. The door to the deck was locked. Evidently it was unsafe to go outside.

He dropped upon a bench and braced himself and sat there for a quarter of an hour, then he saw Sprowle coming up the staircase with the skill of a mariner. The purser scowled at him.

"How long have you been here?" he demanded.

"I don't know, maybe fifteen minutes. Is this a hurricane?"

Sprowle took his seat beside him.

"You may call it that. The wind has been up to a hundred twenty-five miles an hour, but a real hurricane is a circular storm and we would either be at the bottom or all through with it by this time."

"How long will it last?" Wing groaned.

"I don't know. The wind has gone down a little but not much. We've been hove to for hours. You look seasick."

Wing smiled feebly. "I don't feel well."

"I'm not so good myself," admitted the purser. "It's one of the worst gales I've ever been in. Look here, Wing, there's hell to pay besides this. Mr. Wenham's dead."

Wing glanced at him in horror, unable to speak.

"Mur-murdered?" he finally ejaculated.

"No, I don't think so. Looks like heart failure. His wife and daughter are taking on terribly. No sign of foul play. He might have been poisoned, but his face looks peaceable. That fool doctor is so sick I can't get him to come out of his cabin."

"Mr. Wenham dead," muttered Wing. "Poor Maria. And his poor wife."

"Yes, it's a sad case. The worst of it is that when it gets out the passengers will be sure he was murdered, and then we'll have a real panic."

"He was frail," said Wing. "And the horrible ructions of the ship may have affected his heart."

"Yes, or he might have taken some poison himself—committed suicide. His wife says he has been morbid for several days. Would hardly speak to her. Wouldn't get up if he could help it. Hardly been on deck. I'm going to insist it was heart failure and Dr. Roundsby will not know the difference."

Lionel was silent for a moment. "It's queer, though," he said slowly. "Grimaldi predicted more deaths and

told me to watch Wenham, that he was an actor in what he calls his tragedy."

"I remember you told me," replied Sprowle, "and that's why I am taking you into my confidence. I want you to keep your mouth shut. This storm covers the thing up. Anybody with a weak heart might pass out with the terrible rolling and pitching. I can't get any coöperation. I went up the ladder to the captain's quarters, and he wouldn't see me. Told me to get the hell below and not bother him. He wasn't even on the bridge. The first officer is in charge. First time I ever knew Grigsby to stay in his cabin in really bad weather."

"I'm sure the Wenhams would prefer to have it known that Mr. Wenham died a natural death. Murder is too awful. It would kill Maria."

"You're rather sweet there, aren't you?"

"Yes," Wing said defiantly, "I am."

"Well, she's a darn fine girl. Too good for this fellow Sousa. Wenham told me they were practically engaged."

Wing looked startled. "I'm sure that isn't so. She doesn't like him."

"That doesn't matter much in South America," said Sprowle cynically. "Well, I really think it's letting up. We're not pitching as much as we were and I haven't heard the propeller for ten minutes. I can get you some breakfast if you want it."

"Perish the thought," exclaimed Wing vehemently.

The purser sighed heavily. "What a voyage," he said. "I'm going down to have a snack of something."

"When did you learn about Mr. Wenham?"

"Hours ago. I've had the body placed in a vacant cabin. Mrs. Wenham was sleeping on the sofa and her husband in the lower berth. She tried to wake him when the storm broke and she was rolled on the floor, and that's how she found that he was dead. She

ran into her daughter's room and they are crying in each other's arms."

Wing yearned to go down and try to comfort Maria, but there didn't seem to be anything he could say or do and she and her mother might consider it an intrusion. He continued to sit unhappily in the companionway, his stomach responding to each violent heave of the ship. In half an hour, the weather brightened suddenly, and, looking out, he saw a ray of sunlight through a break in the cloud and a patch of blue sky in the gray about as big as a handkerchief.

It must mean that the storm was about over. The wind already had ceased to howl, but the sea, of course, would be very rough for many hours yet. How long would they keep the passengers locked in the stuffy deck house?

Holding on to the bench he looked forlornly through the window out upon the wet and windswept deck; and while he looked apathetically out, astonishing things were happening above.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FALSE CAPTAIN.

CAPTAIN GRIGSBY came out of his cabin abaft the bridge and approached the second officer who was on watch, the first having gone below after a horrible night to snatch a few hours' sleep.

"Go down to your cabin," the captain commanded. "I'll remain here."

The second gaped in astonishment. Whether or not the skipper was on the bridge, there was always a navigating officer there, and the vessel was by no means out of danger now.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir," the second stammered.

"Go down," roared the captain. And then a ray of sun pierced the clouds suddenly and struck full upon the face of Grigsby. It revealed curious lines and an expression that was unfamiliar;

it shone on light blue instead of dark blue eyes, and grease paint.

Out of the pocket of the skipper's oilskin coat came his hand and in the hand there was an automatic pistol.

"Come with me," he commanded. Still pop-eyed with astonishment and alarm, the second preceded Grigsby to the door of the captain's stateroom, entered and had the door slammed on his heels.

Immediately he darted to the speaking tube at the head of the captain's berth and blew down it, but he realized at once that it had been put out of commission. He was a prisoner and a strange man was on the bridge. Where was Captain Grigsby?

The second officer was a young, ruddy, clean-cut British sailor named Henderson, who had a master's certificate and a reputation for being a fine navigator, but he had never been face to face with a situation like this before. There was no way out of the captain's stateroom save through the door which the false Grigsby had locked.

Now that he thought of it, the fellow was a half an inch taller than the skipper and not quite as fat, but he greatly resembled him. Of course that resemblance had been created by stage make-up and he was sure that the kaiser mustache was only pasted on the man's upper lip. Henderson remembered now that he had not seen the skipper for a couple of days except at night, and then only for a second. The first and third officers had remarked that it was extraordinary how Grigsby was keeping to his cabin, but they had thought he was afraid of being roped again.

This man on the bridge was an actor, that's what he was, and an actor could not be a navigator. He would wreck the ship. Henderson beat a tattoo with his fists on the captain's door. No use to open a porthole and shout, for this pirate would be the only person to hear him.

If the quartermaster at the wheel

had observed the strange behavior of the skipper he said nothing and indeed there was nothing he could do, for he had his work cut out for him to hold the wheel. Squires, the quartermaster, was a veteran of the *Stella Maris*, but it was unlikely he would observe that the man on the bridge was not the captain. His eyes were on his instruments.

Henderson knew well enough now what had happened. Grigsby had been captured. The other officers were locked in their rooms and the ship was in the hands of pirates. And he knew why it had happened. They were after the gold in the strong room. If he had put up a fight he would have been drilled and thrown overboard. He was caught, they were all caught, and there was nothing to do about it.

The false Grigsby had walked off the bridge, which was level with the boat deck and was now in conference with a dark, smooth young man whom Doris Drexel had identified as Louis Peterson, the New York gangster.

"The first and third officers are bound hand and foot and locked in their rooms," Louis reported. "We overpowered the armed watchmen last night during the storm and threw them in the lazaret. Kregan and Mott have the chief engineer in his room and he is giving orders down his speaking tube at the point of a gun."

"How about the purser—he has a gun."

Louis laughed. "He hasn't now. One of our men swiped it out of his pants while he slept. This damned Gifford was awake when our men entered his room and he put up an argument, but we got his gun and locked him in the lazaret with the watchmen. What next?"

The false Grigsby chuckled. Without his beard and make-up both Wing and Gifford would have recognized Owen, the Englishman who dined at their table.

"The storm made things easy,"

Owen observed. "I think it has driven us off our course and I won't know until I take the sun at noon just where we are. Keep the passengers locked up in the deck house. Sprowle can't do any harm without his gun, but you better round him up and put him in the brig with the other prisoners. Send Foley up here. I need a watch officer. Tell the wireless man to ignore all messages and wait for the signal."

SO without a shot being fired or a life lost, the *Stella Maris* fell into the hands of conspirators. Owen and his watch officer Foley handled the ship like the skillful navigators which they were. Sprowle, followed by Louis with a gun against his back, moved through deserted alleys down to the lazaret on the lower deck where he found Captain Grigsby, four watchmen and Hank Gifford in a condition of angry astonishment. The new management was in full charge.

The sea slowly flattened, the wind fell, the sun shone warmly and passengers began to assemble in the main companionway, grumbling because the doors to the deck were locked. Wing was among them and Doris Drexel. Maria Wenham, of course, was in her cabin grieving with her mother, but Gifford did not join the throng.

About ten o'clock the false Captain Grigsby came down the narrow stairway from his quarters followed by Louis, Kregan and Mott. All carried guns in their hands.

There were screams from women, and a backward movement by the throng in the companionway and on the main staircase.

"This ship has temporarily been taken out of the hands of her officers," said the man in the captain's uniform loudly. "None of the passengers are in any danger unless they interfere. The ship will continue on her way to Rio de Janeiro after a certain matter has been attended to. Passengers will not be allowed upon the deck for twen-

ty-four hours, so you must make the best of it. All the male passengers will now file into the salon to be searched for weapons. The women may remain here or return to their cabins."

"Hurry up," bawled Kregan. "The line forms to the right. In with you."

A woman fell in a faint. Two had hysterics. Doris clutched Lionel's arm so tightly that her nails hurt him.

"What did I tell you?" she demanded. "They've gone and done it!"

Frightened stewards picked up the unconscious woman and carried her below.

"Come on, Wing," commanded Kregan, singling him out. "Move into the salon and be lively about it."

"I've got to leave you," he said to Doris. "I don't think they mean to harm us. It's the gold they want."

Grimaldi had come leisurely up the stairs, took in the significance of the scene at a glance and turned to descend, but he was spotted.

"Here, you scarecrow," shouted Mott. "In with yer, like the rest of 'em."

The little Jew, Issoto, with frightened eyes and shaking limbs, followed Wing. Three stewards searched the male passengers while Mott stood at one door with his weapon ready and Kregan occupied the other. Wing observed that one of the searchers was his own bedroom steward.

Grimaldi edged close to Wing.

"Did you observe the captain?" he whispered. "It's Owen, the Englishman."

Lionel had not recognized the man, but he realized now that it must be he. "This is one incident in your drama you did not anticipate," he replied in a low tone. Grimaldi scowled.

"I did not take piracy into consideration, I admit, yet it is logical enough. It was known in New York for five or six days that the gold was going down on the *Stella Maris*. If Grigsby had not been a fool he would have anticipated some such attempt."

"What do you suppose they have done with him?"

Grimaldi shrugged. "Knifed him and tossed him overboard, or else they have him a prisoner down below somewhere. I promised you an exciting voyage, Mr. Wing."

The search of the prisoners did not produce a single revolver and only one sheath knife which was taken from a small, inconspicuous Brazilian. Grimaldi had no weapon of any sort. No attempt was made to take the money and jewelry of the passengers.

Owen entered the salon. "What is going on does not concern you gentlemen," he declared, "but any officiousness on your part will mean a quick death. You may move freely between your cabins and this room, but remember a close watch will be kept on you."

He turned on his heel and walked out.

"Would you ever have suspected him?" Wing asked maliciously.

Grimaldi turned his baleful eyes on him. "I suspect everybody," he grated. "Even you."

WHEN a heavy shipment of gold is to go from New York to a foreign country, information regarding it is withheld from the public and is known only to the banks which draw the bullion from the Treasury, the government officials, and the officers of the company which is to transport it.

In the case of the gold on the *Stella Maris* destined for the Scotch bank in Rio, the original intention had been to ship it upon the big mail boat scheduled to sail four days earlier, but this craft ran on a sand bank in New York Bay and, after being dragged off, had to go into drydock to replace damaged plates in her bottom. The next sailing of a big liner would not occur for a fortnight and that one was the slowest ship of the line. Meanwhile it was essential that the gold be in the vaults of the Scotch bank upon a certain day.

After some hesitation the principals of the affair in New York which required the shipment decided to send it on the *Stella Maris*, which was due in Rio the very day the gold must be delivered, upon the assurances of the company that they would push the steamer to her utmost and have her arrive in the Brazilian port at least two days ahead of schedule. As Captain Grigsby informed the purser, a heavy bonus was hung up, picked coal placed on board, the usual stops at Barbados and Pernambuco ordered omitted, and the skipper instructed to drive his ship as she had never been driven before.

One of the reasons for the modern decay of piracy, in addition to the existence of fast cruisers, or airplanes and radios, is the expense attached to the business.

While Captain Kidd sailed the seas in a long, low, wooden brigantine which cost a few thousand dollars, a modern pirate must operate in a fast steamer which he could not charter for a voyage without paying a small fortune; he must arm her with guns, any one of which demands a cash outlay in excess of Captain Kidd's total investment, and the rate of wages for pirate sailors is practically prohibitive.

One might say that no place in the world is safe for a pirate nowadays, but that is not true. The world is as big as it ever was and there are vast and unfrequented stretches of water between North and South America; hundreds, even thousands, of uninhabited islands where a pirate craft could lie for months unobserved and unsuspected.

Meanwhile the vessels which ply in the Atlantic trades are as defenseless as it is possible to imagine. In olden times merchantmen carried batteries of heavy guns and often gave a good account of themselves against buccaneers and freebooters, but the modern liner carries no cannon and her entire arsenal consists of half a dozen revolvers or automatics and perhaps a

rifle or two, if the officers happen to be sportsmen.

Things had happened to the *Stella Maris* upon her arrival in the port of New York which awakened no suspicion in the breast of Captain Grigsby or the owners of the vessel. Her wireless operator offered a shore job, resigned and a new man took his job. Several likely stewards presented themselves to replace half a dozen who left the ship at New York, and extra deck hands and firemen were taken on because of the additional labor necessitated by extra speed on the return voyage. Half a dozen passengers were booked who were in the conspiracy.

While Captain Grigsby had told Sprowle that the members of his crew who were unknown quantity were so few that they could not be dangerous, while he professed to be vigilant, while he armed several of his watchmen and ordered all his officers to strap on weapons, he had been caught entirely unprepared by the tactics of the pirates.

After all, honest men do not shoot down persons against whom they have only vague suspicion and thus they are at a tremendous disadvantage against determined men who bide their time and count upon surprise. And anything so astonishing as an impersonator of the captain was not to be guarded against by literal-minded men.

The Englishman, Owen, was about the same size and build as the skipper, and had the same ruddy complexion, but he was clean-shaved and in mufti bore little resemblance to the captain. In any case, it would not have awakened apprehension in the mind of Captain Grigsby. Like most Englishmen he was ready to suspect of wrong doing anybody but a countryman whose nationality was to him a guarantee of character. The attempt to capture him as cowboys capture cattle or wild horses had failed through the interference of Hank Gifford, but the conspirators were not daunted. Two nights before the storm, as the captain was

walking along the dark, deserted deck, he had been captured and the substitution of clothes and person was made.

TWO unobtrusive passengers named Foley and Hardman were the pirate navigating officers; one an Irishman, one an American. Four stewards were in the plot, four stokers, and six deck hands. The second engineer had been suborned to carry on when his chief was imprisoned.

The prospects of a revolt against them was slight. The passengers cooped up in the deckhouse were harmless, so they believed. The crew would obey any orders which came from the bridge and their plans required holding the ship only twenty-four hours. From the wireless room no S. O. S. would go out to summon warships.

Everything had worked as anticipated. The ship was theirs and while the storm had not entered into their calculations, it had made their task easier.

Like most combination freight and passenger steamers, the passenger quarters were entirely in a deckhouse built upon the main deck. There were exits from it, fore and aft to the main deck, steel watertight doors which were bolted by the pirates, and a ladder aft of the pantries and galleys which led down to the lower deck and the hold. On the lower deck at the foot of the ladder was the strong room in which the gold shipment had been placed, the store rooms, supply rooms, and the brig or lazaret—an apartment about twenty feet square which contained three or four bunks and was lighted by two small ports which could only be opened in fine weather. Air of a sort came to it from a ventilator.

Thus the passengers' and stewards' quarters, kitchen and pantry were all in the deckhouse, which, by the locking of a few doors, was easily cut off from the rest of the ship. Rage as they might, the inmates were unable to interfere with the small band of bold men who had captured the vessel.

Most of the passengers, including Lionel Wing, were too acutely uncomfortable from the motion of the vessel to consider their prospects at the hands of the conspirators. But as the morning wore on and the rolling and pitching became less violent, Lionel wondered where Gifford had hidden during the excitement. Finally he descended to the cabin deck and made his way along a deserted passage to the stateroom of his friend. It was vacant; Gifford's bags were open and the contents on the floor.

"Ye won't be finding him in a 'urry," said a voice, and he turned to see a steward regarding him.

"Why not? Where is he?"

The steward looked around to make sure they were alone.

"They took 'im off hours ago," he confided.

"Who took him off?"

"The blasted pirates. I was just tykin' 'im a bite o' breakfast and 'e was up and dressed when two of 'em came in with guns and told 'im to come along of them. He put up a bit of a fight, but they got 'im."

"But why should they have taken him? He's only a passenger."

"Ah, sir, 'e's the gent that saved the skipper the other day, so I imagine they 'ad it in for 'im."

"Where did they take him, do you think?"

"I expect they shoved 'im in the brig, sir."

"Where is the brig?"

"It's on the deck below the dining salon. I wouldn't advise you to try to get there, sir. There's a chap with a gun on watch there."

"And what were you and the rest of the crew doing when all this was going on?"

The steward grinned. "Mindin' our own business, sir. It's only the gold they want. We won't be 'armed. It ain't no affair of ours."

Wing nodded. "I suppose not."

That they had imprisoned Gifford

frightened him. It must be spite on the part of Mott and Kregan, he thought.

"How many are there in the gang, do you think?" he asked the steward.

"Not many, so the lads say. May-be a dozen or a score. Enough."

CHAPTER XXII.

A CURIOUS ALLIANCE.

AS there was nothing to be done in Gifford's vacant stateroom, he returned to his own cabin which a steward had already put to rights. Apparently the steward's department was functioning as usual. He took a chance and opened his port, and the fresh air which rushed in made him feel much better.

After all, as the steward had said, it was no affair of theirs if the gold was taken from the ship by a band of brigands. It was the business of the ship's officers to protect it, and Grigsby and Sprowle had been given ample warning. They knew that there were murderers and criminals of all sorts on the ship and had left them at large instead of confining them. Kregan and Mott would have been locked up on suspicion by any intelligent policeman.

Were these desperadoes responsible for the deaths which had occurred on board, and the attacks on himself? It seemed likely but, somehow, he did not think so. Imagine the stolid Englishman, Owen, being chief of these pirates, if he were! What a situation for a melodrama or a penny thriller—captured on the high seas!

Having captured the ship, what were they going to do with her? Perhaps run her into some remote island and unload the gold on a vessel which was waiting. And then what?

If they turned her back to her own officers, Grigsby would make for the nearest port, assuming that his wireless was dismantled, and every navy in the world would be on the lookout for the

craft that carried off the gold. Owen, the New York gunmen, the members of the crew who belonged to the gang; they could all be identified.

In their place, what was the intelligent thing to do? The answer made him shiver: it was, to wreck the ship and drown all on board.

If the *Stella Maris* were lost at sea, it would be assumed that the gold had gone down with her and there would be no suspicion of pirates and wreckers. No search except for wreckage and survivors. Were these men cold-blooded enough to consider such a thing?

The more he thought of it, the more he was convinced that death was in store for him and all on board; for gentle little Maria, for merry Doris Drexel, for Gifford, even for Grimaldi. He had done Grimaldi injustice. The fellow might be concerned with the murders, but not with this.

He got up and walked his little room. What happened to the gold might not be his affair, but it certainly was his business to fight for his life and that of the girl he loved—yes, he loved Maria. He must save those other unfortunate women who were fellow-prisoners in this hulk of a ship. How? He didn't have a weapon. He was locked in the deckhouse.

If he had Gifford to consult they might devise something. He checked over the passengers hastily, discarded the Brazilians because he knew none of them save Sousa. He would have sought Owen had not the Englishman turned out to be an important member of the gang. The New York gunmen would have been dependable in this emergency, only they, also, were part of the pirate crew. Grimaldi?

The fellow might be malicious, crazy, even murderous; but he had guile and ingenuity and he must, already, be scheming a way out for himself. He felt the man hated him, and he suspected him of having attempted his life; but that grudge could be set-

tled later. He would consult Grimaldi. He knew his cabin through the door of which, into his own stateroom, the body of Montana had been carried and he acted on his impulse and in a moment was tapping on the door.

GRIMALDI opened it and inspected him sardonically.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" he asked in his most unpleasant tones. The man was without coat and vest and had on a lavender shirt which did not help his ghastly complexion. Wing observed that he wore English trousers, the waistband of which came halfway up his chest, and which were held up by pink suspenders.

"May I come in?" he asked. "There is something I would like to talk to you about."

"Certainly, Mr. Wing. So you think you need me in this emergency?"

"No more than you need me," replied Wing. "Have you thought what is going to happen to us?"

Grimaldi motioned to the sofa and sat himself down on his campstool.

"In all probability," he answered with his hateful smile, "they will proceed to an appointed place of rendezvous with some vessel, transfer the gold, then either open the seacocks of the *Stella Maris* or run her on a coral reef. Having broken all the boats save one which they need for their own escape, they will then abandon the ship. The *Stella Maris* will be posted as missing, later, as lost at sea. It is a very simple problem in deduction."

"Yes," said Wing. "I figured it out about like that. What are we going to do about it?"

The man lifted the place where his eyebrows should have been. "We?"

"Yes. If this program is not to be followed out, it will be because you and I shall put a stop to it."

Grimaldi laughed, but his eyes were less unpleasant than usual.

"I feel complimented, Mr. Wing,"

he said. "You hate me, you suspect me of murder, yet you wish to ally yourself with me in this emergency."

Lionel smiled. "That's about it. With all your faults, you have brains. I'm willing to risk my life, but I have no idea what to do. I thought you might have."

"Your young friend, Mr. Gifford, is in durance vile. He is a fighter. I am not, I'm sorry to say."

"But you will fight for your life."

"Oh, yes. In my own way."

"Do you happen to know why this gold is being sent to Rio?"

The great head nodded.

"Why?"

"I do not care to tell you."

"You are interested in its getting there?"

"You think so? This entire situation would not interest me if I were not sure that they intend to have no survivors to bear witness against them."

"You know the people on board. Whom can we trust?"

"None. One of them is secretly the chief of this band. Owen is a figurehead. He was chosen because he resembled the captain and understands navigation. I suspected him of being a seaman immediately and did not believe his tale of being in the rubber business."

"But there are several English and Americans on board—"

"One of them, perhaps more, is in the plot. It is not a Brazilian plot."

"Well, then, Sousa. Would he fight?"

"He is a rat. Much more likely to betray us in hope of being taken into the band of brigands. I think that you and I must manage this alone, Mr. Wing."

"I'm game, but what can we do?"

"WE must begin by getting those men out of the lazaret. There are Grigsby, Sprowle, your friend Gifford, and several watchmen and seamen there."

"How do you know?" he wondered.

Grimaldi made a grimace. "I have my method of learning things. From the deckhouse to the lower deck there is a small staircase the door of which is kept locked except when the kitchen men go down for provisions. There are two armed men on guard at the staircase. The time to get down below is when the door is opened."

"Supposing we do rescue the men in the lazaret, as you call it. They will be unarmed."

"The situation is peculiar," said Grimaldi. "They plan to hold the ship only a day or two; with their arrangements they could not possibly carry on for any length of time. They have a guard on the fireroom and engineroom crew, guards on deck and guards below as I have explained. I understand the chief engineer and the navigating officers are locked in their cabins and are also under guard. Being distributed like this, it would be easy for a mob of unarmed men to overpower them, provided the mob didn't mind losing a dozen or two of its members. The construction of this ship favors such an attempt as they have made. We in the deckhouse cannot communicate with the crew or vice versa."

"If there was only a way out of the deckhouse I'd try to organize the men forward," Wing sighed.

"They might follow the captain or one of the officers, not a passenger."

"Well, how do we go about getting Grigsby out?"

"You could slip down below, disguised as one of the kitchen men, and then overpower the two guards."

"Armed with automatics, no doubt."

"No doubt," agreed Grimaldi blandly.

"You are not planning to give me any active help, I see."

"I am a physical coward, I am sorry to say," replied this bizarre individual. "I can plan and you must act."

"All right," declared Wing. "Only

"I need a better plan. That's hopeless. If I only had some weapon." He looked at Grimaldi significantly. "Poison gas, for example."

"Yes? That would be excellent under the circumstances," replied Grimaldi. "Unfortunately such gas is not to be laid hands on."

He spoke in so matter-of-fact a manner that Wing was moved to doubt, for the moment, that Grimaldi, himself, had tried to overpower him in his stateroom with such gas, almost even to doubt that any such attempt had been made.

"If we could get weapons we could open cabin windows on the upper deck and shoot at them in comparative safety."

"Yes. Doubtless they thought of that when they searched all passengers and cabins for weapons," replied the man in a dry tone. "Your suggestions are not practicable, Mr. Wing. Suppose you leave me to think things over for awhile. I accept your alliance." He held out his hand and with a noticeable hesitation Lionel clasped it. It was clammy and moist and repulsive.

AFTER he had left Wing wondered if he had been wise to visit the fellow. It might be that Grimaldi himself was the secret chief of those who had captured the ship. For a man who admitted that he expected to be drowned by the pirates, he was singularly self-possessed.

He was sitting on the bench in the main companionway and weighing the situation in this manner, when he heard the cheerful voice of Doris Drexel on the deck below. Being in no mood for airy persiflage with a girl who was doomed to die and didn't know it, he opened a door and stepped into the tiny passage at the left of the entrance to the salon from which a flight of stairs ascended to the quarters of the captain. Sitting on these stairs was the man Kregan.

Kregan had a gun in his hand which he brought into position as Wing confronted him. He grinned when he recognized the visitor.

"Hello, feller," he said. "How's tricks?"

Lionel forced himself to smile. "All right so far."

"That's what the Irishman said what fell from a forty-story building as he went by the twentieth floor," retorted Kregan.

"I get you. Presently something unpleasant is going to happen to myself and the other passengers. What exactly?"

The gunman shrugged his shoulders. "I don't say that. Most likely nothing's going to happen to you."

"When we first had a chat together," said Wing, who imperceptibly edged closer, "you suggested I might like to turn an honest penny. What were you driving at?"

Kregan dangled his hand containing his gun between his knees.

"I took you for another guy, see? And you kept out of the way after that."

"You wanted me to join your gang?" insinuated Wing.

"Yeh. We was short-handed, so the boss thought; but we put it over all right."

"It was very neat," admitted Wing. "Is there any chance now, of enlisting in your pirate crew?"

Kregan was absent-mindedly twirling his gun. "You got a hell of a nerve," he remarked. "After it's all over, you think you'd like to cut in—ouch!"

Wing had suddenly kicked out with his right foot; and caught Kregan with tremendous force in the shin. The pained reaction of the gunman caused him to let the weapon slip out of his hand. Like a panther Lionel was upon him, and in that two and a half foot passageway began a struggle as vicious as it was silent.



Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint



JOKUS ?

SOME months ago we printed in Argonotes a letter from a resident of Scranton, Pennsylvania, who had been won to ARGOSY by an acrostic signed "Jokus," which he found in a library book. The account was interesting, so we printed it and thought no more of it. But now comes word from another Scranton resident:

Scranton, Pa.

You have in myself another new reader, but let me tell you how ARGOSY dogged my footsteps, so to speak, before I made up my mind to give it a trial.

Some few months ago I got a book from the Albright Public Library and found a type-written piece which was headed, "An Acrostic by Jokus." I do not remember the exact words, but I do remember they praised ARGOSY to the skies. That was item one.

Item two, I was passing a store at 1115 Lafayette Street, this city, when I was attracted by a sign in the window saying, "This magazine is over twenty years old and is read and highly recommended by one of our customers." Sure enough, there hung an ARGOSY dated February, 1908; and printed on the front cover in pencil was Jokus.

Item three. My car was laid up for repairs, and I had to take the Laurel Line car to Wilkes Barre. In the waiting room I found a copy of ARGOSY with the name "Jokus" printed on the front cover.

Item four. My girl friend asked me to get her a magazine a week or so ago, and the store where I purchased same was where the twenty-year-old ARGOSY hung in the window. They gave me a copy of ARGOSY dated December 8, and on the contents page, sure enough, I ran into my old friend Jokus.

I decided, after reading, that I would buy the very next issue, I enjoyed this one so much.

But—item five. A few days later my car was parked on North Main Avenue while I was in the theater, and to my surprise after the show I find another copy of ARGOSY in my car. This one was dated November 24—another present from my Nemesis, Jokus. Out of curiosity I walked past several parked cars and found that others had been presented with copies of ARGOSY, all of which had a different cover.

Here I came to the conclusion that it was some kind of an elaborate advertising cam-

paign and decided to buy ARGOSY there and then. The issue I got was January 19, 1929, and did I enjoy it? I'll say especially "Circus Blood," by John Wilstach.

Mr. Editor, your book has spoken for itself, and if ever I miss an issue from now on there is going to be a miniature war in Scranton.

W. G. GREEN.

Jokus's activities are no part of an ARGOSY advertising campaign. In fact, we do not even know the identity of this enthusiastic campaigner. His activities are mystifying—and certainly have us guessing.

Keep up the good work, Jokus, but some time drop us a line and let us in on the secret. Or maybe some other Scranton ARGOSY fan can help us find the key to these queer doin's.

LOTS of good words still coming in for "He Rules Who Can." Incidentally, we just secured another novlette from Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur. It will be coming along shortly.

Muskegon, Mich.

I think "He Rules Who Can" is the best story that has been printed in the ARGOSY since I began to buy it, which is over a year ago. Of the later stories printed, those I like best are: "When Trails Were New," "The Scandal on Kitikait Key!" "A Brand New World," and "Drums of Peace."

GERALD BROWN.

AND a few more favorite stories and authors: 1

Topeka, Kan.

My first contact with the ARGOSY came through the aid of a friend who gave me a few copies. I have never missed one since.

"Buccaneers of the Air," by E. L. Adams, was excellent. "Man of Dreams" was very good, and I would like to have more of this sort.

"The Phantom in the Rainbow," "Longhorn Trail" and "More Than a Double Cross" were also very fine yarns.

STEVE S. YARNOT.

ANOTHER real old-timer steps up; and he nominates "The Moon Pool" for the "best ever" prize:

Mystic, Conn.

I would like to be numbered among the first readers of your magazine. I began with the first issue, when it was known as the *Golden Argosy*, and have been reading it under its various names ever since.

Among its writers were Mr. Munsey, Matthew White, Jr., and Edward S. Ellis. I recall in particular one story called "Afloat in a Great City."

Speaking of the magazine in its present form, I do not see how you could improve it very much. Do not change it; keep it as it is. What I like about it is the variety of its stories—something to suit every one's taste.

Among my favorite authors are A. Merritt, Ray Cummings, and Edgar Rice Burroughs, although you have plenty more good ones.

In regard to the kind of stories I prefer? I like adventure and the impossible kind. I do not care very much for detective stories, although some of them are good. There are some good outstanding Western stories, but the most of them I do not care for.

Your best story, in my opinion, was the "Moon Pool," by A. Merritt. I have been looking forward so long every week for the *ARGOSY* that I would indeed be lost without it. It seems like an old friend, and the reading of it has given me a great deal of pleasure.

ALBERT E. WHEELER.

THOSE old-time yarns—certainly they made an impression on *ARGOSY* readers of a decade or so ago.

Oakland, Calif.

May I take this time to tell you that I am an *ARGOSY* fan of about eight years standing. I buy the *ARGOSY* each and every Wednesday without fail and do not lay it down till I'm finished the book.

The stories are O. K., but I sure miss the tales like "Those Lima Eyes," "The Girl in the Golden Atom," "The Moon Maid," and all the stories that you used to publish several years ago.

Just finished "War Lord of Many Swords-men." It sure is a whizz for action and all that goes to make a good story.

GEO. M. SPRAY.

AN authors' popularity contest, this reader suggests:

BROOKLYN, N. Y.

I would like to make a suggestion. Why don't you conduct an authors' popularity contest? With such authors as MacIsaac, Worts, Wirt, LaMaster, Footner, Seltzer, *et cetera*, this contest would be very interesting. It would also help you select stories to please

your readers because by the authors' popularity you can also judge the popularity of the stories.

JOHN MAHON.

"A SATISFIED READER," from up in Alberta, is right on hand to nominate Fred MacIsaac for such a contest:

Innisfail, Alberta, Canada.

I have been a reader of your wonderful magazine, the *ARGOSY-ALLSTORY*, for some length of time now. I have enjoyed it so much that I think it is my duty to send this little letter along. I think the first story I read was "Horsemen Against the Moon," by Kenneth Perkins. While I have read better stories, it was sufficiently good to warrant my buying more *ARGOSIES*. At home we were a family of nine. It was I who first brought the *ARGOSY* home. There are only two of us at home now. Where one copy would have sufficed at least six more *ARGOSIES* are now needed.

My favorite author is the one and only Fred MacIsaac. His stories are simply marvelous. They contain action, humor, and drama. I especially enjoyed "The Pancake Princess," "Those Lima Eyes," and all the rest. Your best story was "Seven Footprints to Satan." My favorite authors are: Fred MacIsaac, as before mentioned, Burroughs, Lawrence, Franklin, and Coe.

A SATISFIED READER.

YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, *ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY*,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....
- 4.....
- 5.....

I did not like.....
because.....

Name.....

Street.....

City..... State.....



Looking Ahead!

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